NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

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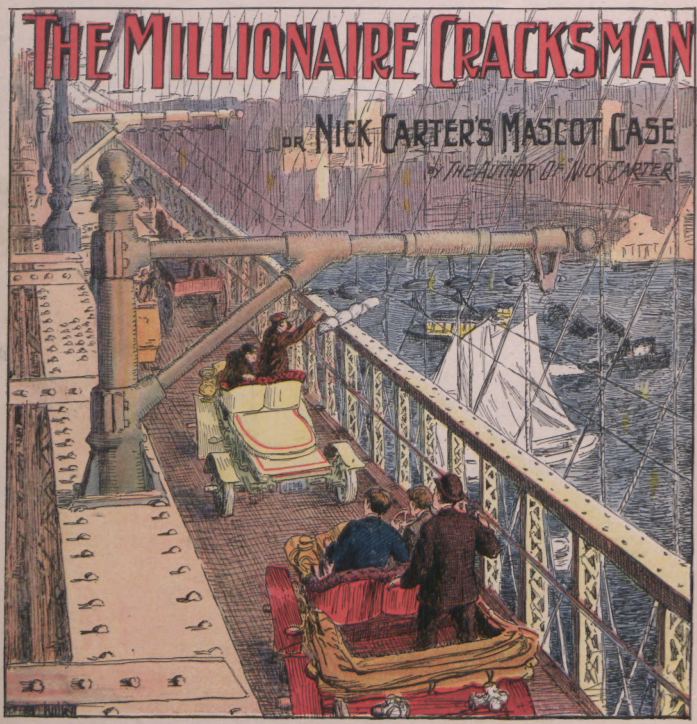
THE MILLIONAIRE CRACKSMAN

OR NICK CARTER'S MASCOT CASE

BY THE AUTHOR OF NICK CARTER



Chick saw the motion Pierce made when he tossed the package over the rail, and was out of his own machine almost before the package left his hand.

Mon. Dec. 9. 1918

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THE MILLIONAIRE CRACKSMAN;

OR,

Nick Carter's Mascot Case.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

A MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE.

Nick Carter was standing on the steps of his own house.

He had just lighted a cigar and would have been gone five minutes before only for the fact that the chauffeur of a big automobile and the driver of an elegantly appointed equipage were indulging in an altercation on the adjacent corner, and he had paused to witness the outcome of it.

The detective was not near enough to hear what was said, and, in fact, he was not in the least interested in the episode, more than to wonder if the two men would eventually leap to the ground and fight it out.

There was no such interesting result to their controversy, however, for presently, with a flourish of his long whip, the driver started up his horses and disappeared up Madison Avenue, and the chauffeur turned on the power of his big machine and was also quickly lost to view.

Then the detective started to descend the steps to the street, when he perceived a young man coming toward him on a run, and he paused again, contemplatively regarding him.

After a moment more the detective was surprised to see the young man dash up his own steps toward him, and to hear him gasp, somewhat chokingly:

"I wish to see Nick Carter at once."

"Do you?" asked Nick. "What do you want with him?"

"He is wanted around at the Belden National Bank at once, sir. It is in Thirty-fourth Street, you know."

"Yes; I know. What has happened there?"

"Mr. Wayne Belden, the banker, has suddenly and mysteriously disappeared."

"Indeed! Since when?"

"Since two hours ago."

"That does not seem to me to be a very extended disappearance," said the detective, smiling.

"No, sir; I will grant you that. But the manner of the disappearance is such as to fill us all with the most grave misgivings. Pardon me; but are you Nick Carter?"

"Yes," said Nick, still smiling. "I am Nick Carter."

"Will you come around to the bank with me at once, sir? I have run all the way here to get you. It was my sister Olive who suggested that I come for you, and I started away at once."

"Who are you, young man?"

"I am Frank Belden; Wayne Belden's son. Will you go to the bank with me, sir?"

"Yes, certainly I will go with you. You can explain the affair as we walk there."

"Thank you, Mr. Carter. It really is a most mysterious affair. I will confess that I am frightened almost out of my wits."

"But why? This is Sunday. Banks are not open on Sundays."

"No, sir. That is quite true. But all the same my father has always been in the habit of passing his Sunday afternoons in the counting room of the bank. He was there this afternoon the last we knew about him; it was from there that he disappeared."

The two were walking rapidly along the avenue by this time, and now the detective looked at his watch.

"It is now almost half-past five o'clock," he said, returning it to his pocket. "What time did your father go to the counting room of the bank?"

"We dined at one o'clock. He went from the table directly to the counting room."

"But in that case he would have been there at least four hours, and you say that he has been missing only two. How do you adjust those two statements?"

"My sister Olive saw him through the window of the counting room about three o'clock. I suppose you are aware of the fact that our residence is next door to the bank, and that there is a private entrance to the bank from the house, through the counting room, sir."

"I knew that your house was next to the bank, but I did not know about the private entrance to which you refer. You say that your sister saw him through the window at about three?"

"Yes; it might have been a few moments before, or it might have been a few moments after that hour, but it was approximately that time."

"What was he doing when your sister saw him?"

"He was seated at his desk and apparently writing a letter."

"Did she speak to him?"

"No, sir. That was impossible. The window to which I refer is situated rather peculiarly."

"How so?"

"It opens upon a narrow space, or court, between the two buildings and is located so high from the floor of the counting room that the sill is just even with my chin when I stand erect."

"And you are about five feet ten," said the detective, scanning the stature of the young man beside him.

"Exactly that. The lower half of the window is of cathedral glass; the upper half of ordinary glass. There are steel bars outside the window to protect it; but any person standing at the side window of my sister's room can see into the counting room of the bank."

"And it was from that point that your sister last saw your father?"

"Yes. His desk and chair are in plain view from her window, and she frequently looks to see if he is still there, when she knows that he has gone into the bank."

"And she saw him through the window at his desk at about three o'clock, eh?"

"Yes."

"Now, tell me in what manner he was missed, and why the mere fact of his not being in view should frighten you and your sister."

"A gentleman came to call upon him, and as soon as my sister knew about it, she went to the counting room to tell him that Mr. Pierce was there. My father was not in the counting room and it is quite certain that he had not passed through the house to go out. More than that, his hat and coat were on a chair beside the desk at which he had been writing, and a half-finished letter with a blur and a blot at the end of the writing seemed to indicate that he had been suddenly interrupted. Still another circumstance of importance is that he was wearing his slippers at the time he entered the counting room, and his valet says that every hat and every pair of shoes that my father possesses is in its accustomed place; again, not one of us has ever known him to leave the house in his slippers."

"Humph!" said Nick. "There are some interesting features about your statement. When your sister discovered that your father was not in the counting room, what did she do?"

"She returned to the house and sought him in his own room, thinking that he had gone to it."

"Well, what more?"

"Not finding him there, she returned to the bank. The door of communication between the counting room and the bank proper is always kept locked after the bank closes—or, rather, at all times when the bank is closed. It was locked then, and so Olive returned again to the house to find father."

"And was again unsuccessful, I suppose?"

"This time she searched the house thoroughly. Then she called Judson, my father's valet, and he took part in the search. There was no sign of father to be dis-

covered anywhere. Then Olive remembered that the duplicate keys to the inside locks used in the bank were in the small safe in his room and that she knew the combination, so she procured the key to the door between the counting room and the bank."

"And entered the bank in search of him?"

"Yes, sir."

"With the same result?"

"With the same result. He was not there, and it seemed that he had not been inside the bank at all; or, if he had, he had left no trace of the fact."

"And then?"

"My sister returned to the house. She was frightened by that time. It happened that just as she returned from the bank I entered the house by the street door. It was my first information about what had happened, or what was supposed to have happened. At first I pooh-poohed the idea of anything having happened to him, just as you were inclined to do when I approached you on the subject; but Olive's fears gradually communicated themselves to me, and now I am as badly worried as she is."

"But what in the world could have happened to your father without the knowledge that something had occurred being communicated to you?"

"That is just what puzzles us, sir. That is the mystery. That is what fills us with alarm, for there is no place to which he could have disappeared without passing through the house, and he could not have done that without the fact becoming known."

"What did you do when you were made aware of the mystery?"

"I practically did exactly what my sister had already done."

"That is to say, you searched the house and the bank?"

"Yes, sir; both."

"Without obtaining any trace of him, eh?"

"Absolutely none, sir."

"And the valet—Judson?"

"He assisted me."

"All this time was the gentleman who had called to see your father waiting?"

"He assisted in the search after I came home."

"Ah! Then he is a friend of the family?"

"Yes, sir. As a matter of fact, he has for a long time attempted to pay court to my sister, and it was really upon her that he called instead of my father."

"Then, why——"

"I know what you would ask, Mr. Carter. The attentions of Mr. Pierce to my sister meet with my father's entire approval, but not with Olive's. He is a rich man, is my father's associate and friend although he is only a little older than I am, and is, therefore, quite acceptable as a suitor for Olive's hand in my father's eyes. But it is not so with Olive. She has refused him two or three times."

"Your sister does not like Mr. Pierce, then?"

"Oh, yes, she likes him well enough. They are quite good friends; but she says that she will never have him for her husband, and, I believe, has notified him that if he asks her again to do so, even their friendly relations will cease."

"So he assisted in the search, did he?"

"Oh, yes; and became quite as concerned about it as we were."

"Is he there at the house still?"

"He was there when I came away, and stated his intention of remaining until I returned."

"Have there been other callers at the house to-day?"

"Not one, sir."

"Why are you so confident that your father could not have returned to the house from the counting room and afterward gone out without the knowledge of anybody?"

"James, the footman, was on duty at the front door all that time and would have seen my father had he gone out; that is one reason. The others I have already told you: There is not a hat, or a pair of shoes, or a street coat that my father possesses, missing from its accustomed place, and he would not have gone upon the street dressed as he was, for you will remember that I have just said that he was in his shirt sleeves and slippers."

"But if he is not in the house or in the bank, he must have gone out."

The banker's son shook his head.

"I would as soon think that he had dissolved into thin air," he said, gloomily.

CHAPTER II.

THE MYSTERY DEEPENS.

When Nick Carter entered the home of the banker, Olive Belden met him at the door, and it was at once evident to the detective that the daughter was seriously alarmed.

Near her, when the detective entered, were grouped the other persons to whom Frank Belden had referred: Judson, the valet; James, the footman, and Mr. Putnam Pierce, the guest and erstwhile suitor for Olive's hand.

Nick was at once presented to the last, but he only bowed formally, and turning to Olive he said:

"Before we enter upon a general discussion of this matter, Miss Belden, I would like to have you take me to the counting room of the bank, where you last saw your father through the window from your room."

"Then, if you will please come with me," she replied; and turned to lead the way, the others, as a matter of course, following along after; but Nick turned to them before he had taken a dozen steps.

"I will ask the others to wait here until we return," he said, pointedly. "Miss Belden and I can attend to this part of the matter alone."

When Nick, accompanied by Olive, entered the counting room, he indicated a chair in which he wished her to be seated, and himself dropped into the chair in front of the desk where the banker had been writing a letter.

"I will ask you a few questions presently, Miss Belden," he said; "but first I will study the situation as I find it here. I suppose this is the letter which your father was engaged in writing?"

He picked up a half-finished letter from the desk as he spoke, and held it before him; and as Olive only replied by an inclination of her head, he proceeded to read.

It was written with a pen on a sheet of the banking house paper, and was as follows:

"MR. JOHN GRAMMERCY, Hotel Mammoth, City.

"DEAR SIR: You were notified yesterday, officially, that the Mexican and American Trust Company, of New York, has passed affirmatively upon your application that it negotiate your bonds. This is, therefore, merely a personal letter. I wish to say that before all the arrangements are closed, I wish to have a private talk with you regarding some of the details, and so, if you will call upon me at the Belden National Bank at——"

It was here that the letter came to an abrupt end, with a long scratch of the pen, and an unmistakable blot on the page.

The detective raised his eyes to the face of the girl who was seated opposite him.

"What is the Mexican and American Trust Company?" he asked.

"A concern of which my father is also the president," she replied.

Nick did not pursue the subject, but turned in the chair and permitted his eyes to roam from point to point around the room for several moments.

Two or three times while he was thus employed he appeared to study some particular spot that came under his observation, with more care than he devoted to the others, and it was not until his glance had made the entire circuit of the room and had returned to the beautiful face opposite him, that he spoke again.

"Your father was seated where I am now when you saw him through the window, was he not?" he asked.

"Yes, sir."

"And he was apparently engaged in writing?"

"Yes."

"Could you, from that window, see the paper upon which he was writing?"

"Yes."

"Do you think it could have been this letter that I hold in my hand that he was then engaged upon?"

"I could not possibly answer that question, Mr. Carter. I only know that he was writing upon a letter head of the bank. You will notice that it is rather a unique design, and I remember that I recognized it at the time."

Nick nodded. He liked the clear manner in which this girl replied to him. He saw that she was one who was positive about what she did know, and who did not guess at what she did not know.

"And you saw him in the manner you describe, about three o'clock?"

"The time must have been within ten minutes of three o'clock, before or after the hour. I cannot fix it more closely than that."

"Now, what time was it when you came here to announce to him that Mr. Pierce was here?"

"Very soon after five. I recall the fact that the chimes of the hall clock had struck the hour only a few minutes before; not more than two or three I think."

"You see," said Nick, musingly, "if this was the letter he was writing at the time you saw him through the window, he must have been interrupted very soon after that; while on the other hand, if it were another letter, he might not have been interrupted until almost the time when you entered the counting room."

"I have thought of that, Mr. Carter, and my intuition —which is said to be a trustworthy quality in a woman —tells me that you hold in your hand the letter that he was writing at the moment I saw him through the window."

"I think that, also," said Nick. "And if it is so, you were very near to looking through the window at the very moment of the interruption."

"I have thought of that, also. If I had only been a few moments later——"

"There seems to be no means of entering this room, save by one of the two doors I see," said the detective. "One of those communicates with the bank, and was, you say—or, rather, as your brother says—locked at the time."

"It was locked; yes."

"And the other is the door by which we entered, which communicates with the house. There is no other way of entering or leaving this room, is there?"

"None whatever."

"You are, I suppose, positive that there is no secret door concealed here anywhere?"

"I am sure there is not."

"And beyond that door which opens into the bank there are only the main doors of the building which communicate with the bank, of course."

"Certainly."

"Was your father in the habit of passing his Sunday afternoons in this room?"

"Yes, sir; invariably."

"He carried, I suppose, a key to that door which opens into the bank?"

"Always."

"And there were duplicates to all his keys kept in the small safe in his sleeping room in the house?"

"Yes."

"Your brother tells me that you are aware of the combination of that safe, and that you knew about the duplicate keys. Is there another person who possesses the same knowledge?"

"No, sir. I am the only one. My father trusted me with that knowledge so that in the event of an accident there would be one person who could obtain possession of his duplicate keys; but even my brother could not have procured them."

"I understand. "Now, let us return for a moment to the question of the doors."

"Yes, sir."

"I noticed, as we came to this room, that the door by which we entered opens into this one from the library of the house."

"Yes."

"I suppose you agree with your brother that it would have been impossible for your father to have returned to the house and have passed out of it without some person being aware of the fact."

"I do; but there is another and a stronger reason."

"Is there? What is that?"

"After I saw my father in this room from the window of my own room, I went directly to the library, and I remained there, reading, until Mr. Pierce was announced."

"Then he could not have gone from this room through the house without your personal attention being drawn to the fact, could he?"

"No; he could not."

"At least, not unless he had started up at once—at almost the instant you saw him."

"Even then he could not have done it, for I came directly down the stairs, and I would have encountered him."

"All this, however, does not preclude the possibility that he may have used his key to the other door and gone into the bank."

"N-no; but if you will permit an opinion, there seems to me to be one probability which does preclude it."

"What, in your opinion, is that one?"

"The condition of the letter he was writing. If of his own accord he had done what you suggest, there would have been no sudden stoppage to the letter; or, at least, there would have been no blot, would there?"

"Miss Belden, you would have made an excellent detective."

"He must have been interrupted suddenly and unexpectedly, while he was engaged in writing, I believe. Either a person was concealed in this room——"

"But that is manifestly impossible, for there is no place in this room where a man could conceal himself."

"That is true; but I was about to add that the person who did interrupt him might have been concealed in the bank beyond that door."

"I think," said Nick, smiling, "that we will ultimately arrive at the decision that such is the fact. But we must not get ahead of our horses. How much disturbance of the articles in this room has occurred since you came here to find your father and discovered that he had disappeared?"

"Nothing has been disturbed. I had the forethought to direct that not a thing here should be touched."

"That was very thoughtful of you. Then I am to conclude that the hat and coat on yonder chair are exactly where your father placed them before he sat down here to write?"

"Unless the person who intruded upon him moved them, they are exactly as he placed them."

"And this cigar. I see that your father had just lighted it. Was he in the habit of putting down a lighted cigar as carelessly as this? You see, it has burned the cloth with which the desk is covered."

"My father is an extremely methodical man; I believe all bankers are so. Invariably, when smoking, if he had occasion to lay aside his cigar for a moment, he had a place to put it, and he always put it in that place."

"Yes."

"You will notice a tray, there on the desk near the ink well."

"Yes."

"You will see that he had already smoked one cigar, and that, therefore, the one you now hold in your hand was his second one since dinner. If he had put that cigar down deliberately—and he does everything deliberately—you would have found it on the ash tray with the lighted end resting upon the ashes of the burned cigar."

"Miss Belden, you amaze me by the clearness of your perceptions. We are to conclude, then, that he dropped the cigar as suddenly as he did the pen, are we not?"

"That is my own opinion, Mr. Carter."

"And that, I suppose, is why you left the cigar where I found it, until I came."

"It is."

"Are you in the habit of coming into this room frequently, Miss Belden?"

"Yes; very often."

"And you are one who notices things closely, I perceive."

"It is almost second nature for me to do so, sir."

"For example, if you were to go to your own room now, you would know at once if any article there had been moved from its accustomed place since you left it; eh?"

"I would; instantly."

"You have said that your father is methodical."

"Yes."

"Then, I suppose that, as a rule, articles in this room remained in about the same relative positions, always?"

"Yes."

"When you came into this room in search of your father, did you notice that there was any article here which was not in its accustomed place?"

"Two; this chair in which I am now seated should have been over against the wall behind where I am sitting. It was here, almost in the middle of the floor, and it was facing half around. You will remember that when you directed me to sit here, you were obliged to turn it about so that I would confront you."

"Excellent. Anything more?"

"My father's gold-headed cane is missing."

"Missing? Where from?"

"From the rack beside the door which leads to the bank."

"I see."

"You will notice that there are two umbrellas and one cane now in the rack."

"Yes."

"There should be two canes. One of them—a gold-headed one—is missing."

"When did you last see it in the rack?"

"Yesterday afternoon, about four o'clock."

"Might not your father have removed it since then?"

"I do not think that he did so."

"Why not?"

"Because I have never known him to carry that cane at all. I have never known him to handle it, even. It was associated with an unpleasant episode in his business, and he not only declined to touch it himself, but he would not permit others to handle it."

"Humph! Later, possibly, I will ask you about that episode, Miss Belden."

"I can tell you all that I know about it in a very few words."

"Very well; I will hear it now, in that case."

"It was connected with some transaction in which he was engaged when I was quite a young girl. The man who carried it—I do not know his name—defrauded my father out of considerable money. He left the cane here when he went away, and it was my father's notion that some day the man would return. Whether it was my father's idea to strike the man with his own cane when he should appear, or if he merely indulged an ironical pleasure in contemplating it, I cannot say; but that is all I ever knew about it."

"And now the cane is gone. I think, Miss Belden, if you still have the key to yonder door in your possession, that I will now take a look inside the bank."

CHAPTER III.

A SPOT OF BLOOD.

Olive Belden leaned forward and laid the key to the door on the desk between her and the detective.

"There it is," she said. "Shall I remain here, or accompany you?"

"You may remain here, if you will, until I call to you. But a question or two more before I leave you."

"Yes?"

"Have you noticed any other discrepancies connected with this room, save those of the chair and the cane?"

"No, sir."

"With those two exceptions, everything here appears as it always has?"

"To the best of my knowledge—yes."

"I do not recall that I ever saw your father to know him. Will you describe him to me?"

"He is rather taller than you are. He wears no beard at all—is smooth shaven. His hair, and he has a great deal of it, is naturally very black, and has only begun to turn gray. He is rather broad and heavy. I think his weight is about two hundred. He is very alert in his motions, and——"

"Thank you. That will do very well, indeed," said Nick; and at the same time he bent forward and took something from the floor.

"Do you happen to know if this room was cleaned lately?" he asked.

"It is cleaned thoroughly every Saturday afternoon, in addition to the regular cleansing it has every day after banking hours," replied Olive.

"Then this object must have been dropped here since yesterday; eh?"

As he spoke he laid the half of a link cuff button on the desk in front of him.

"It is quite pretty, isn't it?" he said. "Set with a turquoise and two diamonds. Do you recognize it as having belonged to your father?"

"No, sir; I do not."

"Or as one that you ever saw before?"

"That is what I was endeavoring to determine, Mr. Carter. It seems to me that I have seen such a link button as that somewhere, but I really cannot place it at present."

"It may occur to you later," said Nick. "Now, if you will wait here, I will look inside the bank."

He left her, and, making use of the key she had given him, passed inside the bank and closed the door after him.

Just beyond the door he paused in his tracks and turned his eyes first one way and then another.

But gaze as he might—and he remained many minutes in that position—those eyes which seldom permitted anything to escape them, discovered nothing worth noting.

The interior of the bank, as far as he was able to determine, appeared to remain in exactly the condition in which it had been left by the employees at the time of their departure from it Saturday afternoon.

After a while he strode forward and passed through the cashier's office into the space behind the screen; but

there, as was the case in front, nothing appeared to have been disturbed.

There were three large, iron safes there in addition to the vault in which the money was supposed to be kept; and this latter, he observed, was provided with a time lock.

He passed from one safe to another, studying them critically, until he had examined all of them thoroughly, and he stopped only at the largest.

There he made use of his magnifying glass, and he devoted considerable study to the entire front surface of the safe; but at last he passed on with a negative shake of his head.

After that he returned to the counting room and called to Olive.

"Are you as familiar with the bank as you are with the counting room?" he asked.

"No," she said. "I know nothing at all about the bank."

"Nevertheless, I wish you would take a look around it. I have already discovered that you have exceedingly good eyes, but what is of vastly more importance, very clear perception."

"Thank you. I will look around, if you care to have me do so."

"Just proceed in your own way, and when you have finished, come to me in the counting room and tell me the result of your examination; and if you don't object, I will smoke a cigar in the counting room while I am waiting for you."

"Certainly. Smoke, by all means. My father always said that tobacco helped him to think."

She left him, then, and Nick passed into the counting room, lighted a cigar, closed the door in order to leave Olive entirely to her own devices, and seated himself in the banker's chair to think.

"This strikes me as being very much like some of the problems in algebra that I used to fight shy of when I was a boy in school," he mused, silently. "A equals the banker, seated in this chair; b is the locked door directly in front of him; c is the bank beyond that door, and x is the unknown quantity which—pshaw! I'll begin all over again.

"I will suppose that I am the banker; I am seated in this chair engaged in writing this letter; I am smoking a cigar; the door in front of me opens suddenly—nit! That is not it, sure thing. The door was locked.

"Eh? No, it was not locked, for if it had been locked, the turning of the key in the lock to open it would have apprised the banker of the fact that somebody was there, and he would not have dropped the burning cigar upon the desk; in that case he would have held it in his hand, or, if he put it down at all, he would have done the act according to his habit, and put it on the tray.

"Now, from the location of that burned spot on the cloth, it is evident that the cigar was not dropped there from the banker's hand, but from his lips, and nothing on earth would have induced him to drop it from his lips short of a blow on his head; and such a blow must have come from behind.

"Now, let me go a little further into that idea."

He pulled a sheet of paper toward him and bent forward, in the attitude of writing; and he noticed as he did so, that the arrangement of papers on the desk in front of him effectually screened the door from view.

"That settles that point," he muttered. "The banker could not have seen a man who entered by that door; but why in the world did he not hear him? I'll settle that question definitely as soon as Miss Olive Belden returns to this room.

"Next, if the banker neither saw nor heard a man who entered at that door, would it have been possible for the man to have passed around behind him without being seen?"

Again he bent forward in the attitude of writing, and when he held his eyes quite close to the paper, he became convinced that in that attitude only would such a thing as he had described be possible.

"If the banker was—or is—both nearsighted and somewhat deaf, it might have been done," he mused. "Now, what next?"

"If we find that these premises are true, then it follows that the intruder entered by that door from the bank, which he had previously unlocked in order to have it in readiness; that he, perhaps, crouched a little lower than his natural height, in order to more completely escape observation; that he reached out to the rack beside the door and secured possession of the gold-headed cane; that then he glided around the desk at which the banker was seated, keeping close to the wall as he did so; that ultimately he secured a position behind the banker, and that from that point he struck him on the back of the head with the cane.

"Well, all that is a very pretty, little fiction, possibly, but it seems to be the only tenable proposition at which I can arrive at the present state of the case.

"But there are two strong objections.

"What was the motive, and how the devil did the fellow get inside the bank in the first place?

"There is also one almost prohibitive objection:

"If all this that I have said should be true, where is the banker now?

"Two hundred pounds of flesh and blood, of muscle and sinew, doesn't evaporate into nothing and leave behind it no trace whatever. If it were not for the fact that Olive was seated in the library at the very time when all this must have happened, I should be inclined to think that one of the servants of the house, having a grievance, might have entered at the other door and done the deed, afterward carrying the body out through the

house and concealing it in the cellar; or, at least, somewhere inside the house. But that cannot be entertained at all.

"Well, let me approach the other proposition from another standpoint.

"Given the proposition that the man was inside the bank; given that he did have a key to yonder door; given that he did enter this room without being seen or heard by the banker; given that he did get behind the man and strike him with the cane and kill him, what on earth did he do with the body afterward, and how in blazes did he get out of the place afterward, himself, without leaving a trace behind him to tell that he had come and gone?

"Whew! This is a crackerjack of a case.

"He couldn't carry the body away with him through Thirty-fourth Street in the broad light of day, without being observed; he could not even convey it to a carriage outside, if he had one in waiting for him, without being seen.

"The house and the bank are side by side; and—well, we will take the proposition also that he had the body on his hands; now, how did he get rid of it?

"I suppose, since I am dealing in suppositions, I may as well go the limit; so I will say that a man who could introduce himself into the bank in the way he must have succeeded in doing in order to have accomplished this thing at all, must also have had the talent to be able to open one of the safes and put the body inside it, after which he closed it again.

"Humph! Talk about dealing with impossibilities! This about takes the cake.

"However, I've got the banker killed in the only way it could have been done; I have disposed of the body in the only way it apparently could have been done, and now I must get rid of the murderer in the only way in which he could possibly have made his escape.

"If he came into the bank at all, he had keys and came in through the door; and if he committed the crime as I think he must have done, and disposed of the body after the only fashion possible, then, of course, he left as he came, through one of the street doors—there are two, I observed—and walked calmly away about his other business, satisfied that he had left everything here just as he found it.

"Not quite, though. I wonder why he carried away that cane? I wonder why he did not search for that broken link from his cuff?

"Possibly he did not miss the latter until it was too late to take it away with him; and as for the cane—there might have been blood or hair on it, or it might have been broken; but, even so, I don't exactly see what in the world he wanted of it.

"All this conjecture seems highly improbable, and yet it is the only thing that could have happened, to account for all that has taken place here.

"The banker was in this room, and he could not have left it save to go into the bank, without being seen. He was hatless and in his shirt sleeves and slippers, and he would not have gone out in that condition under any circumstances, and certainly he would not have carried the cane with him had he done so.

"The man who attacked him could not have been already concealed in the bank, because he would have had no way to get out of it after committing the crime.

"I guess I will leave further conjecture alone until I glean a few more facts; and there should be a few more.

"Ah, Miss Belden. You have completed your task, I see. Have you found anything of interest, do you think?"

"I don't know, Mr. Carter. I wish you would come into the bank with me for a moment. I wish to show you something that I did find."

Nick left his chair at once and followed her into the bank; and she led the way behind the screen and around to the rear of the safe where Nick had paused the longest time.

"There," she said, pointing toward the floor behind the safe, where there was a space about two feet wide; "I wish you would look at that and tell me what it is."

She had become very pale, for the spot at which she pointed was a spot of blood.

CHAPTER IV.

WHERE THE BANKER WAS FOUND.

Nick Carter had not attempted to look behind the safe while he had been in the bank, for the reason that his first investigation was only preliminary at best, and he did not care at that moment to make it more thorough than he had done.

Moreover, the young lady was awaiting him in the counting room, and he desired to hasten back to her as quickly as possible.

But now that the spot of blood was pointed out to him, he got down upon his knees to examine it more closely.

The floor was bare just there, and had been stained a very dark red that was almost a brown; nevertheless, the blood stain was plainly visible, as was also the fact that it was really blood.

The spot itself was apparently the size of a silver half dollar, and it seemed not to have spread at all.

In a word, the detective decided at once that the body of the banker had been placed there temporarily, after it was brought from the counting room into the bank.

"Doubtless," he argued, mentally, "the assassin made haste to get out of the counting room as quickly as possible after the deed was committed, knowing that he would not be in danger of immediate interruption here, even

though the banker's absence from the counting room were discovered. Then, preliminary to the opening of one of the safes for the hiding of the body, he laid it here.

"Also, that spot of blood, because of its size and position, carries out the almost impossible theory that I have already formed; which is, that the man was struck on the back of his head with the cane."

He rose to his feet again and turned to face Olive.

He saw then that she was trembling, and he made an attempt to turn her mind to other thoughts than that of a possible fatal accident to her father.

"You displayed unusual skill in discovering that blood spot," he said, smiling.

"What does it mean?" she demanded, breathlessly.

"My dear Miss Belden, it is utterly impossible to answer that question at the present moment."

"Does it not indicate that my father has been attacked here in the bank, and that something terrible has happened to him?"

"It might mean that; and also it might have many other and different meanings."

She shook her head in a decided negative.

"No, no," she said. "That is what it means. It is what I have felt and feared all along, from the very first moment that I missed my father."

"Do you know of any person who would be inclined to attack him merely because of a wanton desire to do him a personal injury?"

"No, sir, I do not; unless——"

"Well, unless what?"

"Unless it might have been the man who was originally the owner of that cane. You remember that the cane is missing?"

"Certainly; but we do not know who did own the cane."

"Oh, sir. Find out first what has become of my father. After that it will be time enough to go into the question as to who was here with him."

"You are right, Miss Belden. What is the name of the cashier of the bank?"

"Thomas Blake."

"Where does he live?"

"In Madison Avenue, near Twenty-ninth Street. Do you want him? He has a telephone in his house."

"Yes. I want him at once."

"I will call him."

"Then do so at once, and from the counting room. It is just as well not to apprise the telephone people of the fact that we are inside the bank. After you have done that and while we are waiting for him to put in an appearance, I will ask you to take me back to the house."

The telephonic message was soon sent, and after being informed that Mr. Blake would be at the bank within half an hour, Olive led Nick into the house again.

"I wish you would take me directly to your own room," he said to her. "I wish to have a look through that window through which you saw your father; after that we will go to the parlor, where your brother and Mr. Pierce are awaiting us."

The detective was somewhat surprised at the clearness with which he could see into the interior of the counting room from that window, as has already been described.

He could understand now why it was that Miss Belden was so positive concerning the character of paper upon which her father was writing when she looked down at him.

"If you had only looked through this window a few moments, or a few seconds, later than you did," he said, half aloud; but she overheard the remark.

"You agree with my idea, then, that he was attacked while he sat in his chair at the desk, do you not?" she asked.

"I am afraid we will have to come to that conclusion," admitted the detective.

"But where is he? What has become of him?"

Nick made no reply.

"If he were attacked and—killed," she persisted, "surely there would be some trace of it, would there not? Something more than that small spot of blood on the floor?"

"It would seem so," he agreed.

"But suppose that he were attacked, and injured—perhaps killed—what have they done with him?"

"What, indeed?" asked Nick.

"He cannot be hidden away in the bank, for I looked everywhere."

"It is a very great mystery," said the detective, determined not to commit himself just yet.

No more was said on the subject just then, and, after a moment, they descended to the parlor, where the banker's son and Putnam Pierce were awaiting them. But Olive turned aside before they reached the parlor, and she did not appear again until the cashier was announced.

"May I ask if you have arrived at any conclusion regarding the mystery?" asked Pierce of the detective as he entered the room.

"We seem to be no nearer a solution of it than when we left you," replied Nick, taking a seat with his back toward the light, for it had grown dark during the last half hour, and the lights in the parlor had been turned on.

"It is beyond question, then, that he must have gone out of the house without being seen by anybody, is it not?" was the next question.

"That seems to have been impossible, since Miss Belden tells me that she was in the library during all the time when he would have had to use that route to leave the house."

"But if he did not do that, what in the world has become of him?"

"Therein lies the mystery, Mr. Pierce."

"I am told that the door between the counting room and the bank was found closed and securely locked, so he could not have gone that way."

"No."

"Then it follows that he must have gone by this route, through the house."

"Yes, if he went out at all."

"But if he did not go out at all, he should still be somewhere in the bank, eh?"

"I entirely agree with you in that surmise, Mr. Pierce."

"But you say he is not there."

"On the contrary, I said no such thing."

The detective could not have explained exactly why he instinctively disliked this man of the rather supercilious air, who kept his gloves on his hands during his call, but that he did dislike him at once, he knew.

"That is what I understood you to say, sir."

"You were mistaken. What I said was that we could not find him."

"But, my dear fellow, if he were there in the bank, you would be able to find him. The idea that you would not is utter nonsense, you know."

"Oh, I have no doubt that we shall find him."

"Do you mean," exclaimed Frank Belden, starting to his feet, "that you fear that my father has been murdered, and that his body is even now concealed somewhere in the bank?"

Nick did not reply directly to the question. What he did do was to turn to the young man and say:

"It is almost certain, my boy, that your father would not hide himself away in this manner, and it is equally certain that he would not permit another to do it for him, unless that other person first disabled him, or rendered him helpless. I have sent for a gentleman who will assist me in the search, and he will be here presently. And now, I wish you to do something for me."

"What is it, sir?"

"I wish you to go to your sister, who, I think, has gone to her room, and I wish you to remain there with her until I call you. Will you do that?"

"If you really wish it, certainly."

"I do wish it; and I also wish that you would keep her there."

"Is there not something that I can do to assist you, also?" asked Pierce, as soon as Frank had gone from the room.

"I can think of nothing just at present, unless you would wish to go with us to the bank and assist in the search as soon as the gentleman whom I am expecting arrives."

"Do you think that I could aid you?"

Nick thought he detected a slight reluctance in the question, and he replied, quickly:

"An extra pair of eyes and another brain are always of assistance, sir."

"If you feel that way, I will certainly accompany you."

The bell rang at that moment, and a moment later Thomas Blake was ushered into the room.

Blake did not, of course, know Nick Carter from Adam; but he did appear to know Putnam Pierce very well, indeed, and, on the other hand, Pierce seemed quite amazed to find who the expected caller really was.

"I was not aware that it was Mr. Blake for whom you had sent," he said, turning to the detective; "and I now see that you are unknown to each other. Mr. Blake, let me present Mr. Nicholas Carter, the detective, to you."

"Miss Belden told me over the phone that her father had disappeared very mysteriously, and that I was wanted here at once," said Blake. "Will you tell me about it?"

It was not necessary for the detective to reply to this question, for Pierce launched at once into a detailed account of the affair as he knew it—or was supposed to know it; and presently, perceiving that the explanation might last much longer than was necessary, Nick rose and started toward the library.

"Gentlemen," he said, "if you will now come with me to the bank, we will make another effort to find the banker."

From the counting room he turned on the electric switch which connected with the bank, and, as soon as they passed inside, Nick led the way directly to the big safe behind which the spot of blood had been found.

"Gentlemen," said Nick—and for some reason he kept his eyes fixed on the face of Putnam Pierce as he was speaking, "I am of the opinion that if Mr. Wayne Belden is in the bank at all, he will be found inside that safe: or if he is not now alive, I believe that we will discover his body there."

"Good Heaven, Mr. Carter!" exclaimed the cashier. "What in the world——"

"Wait. You know the combination of that safe, do you not?"

"I do."

"Then oblige me by opening it."

Without another word the cashier attacked the combination of the safe, and, after a short time, he stepped backward and then threw the huge doors ajar.

And then he uttered a shout of terror; for there, huddled in a heap inside the safe, was indeed the dead body of Wayne Belden, the banker.

CHAPTER V.

THE DETECTIVE'S SEARCH FOR A CLEW.

We have followed Nick Carter throughout this process of reasoning from which he had succeeded in deducing the fact that the body of the banker must somehow have found its way into one of the safes of the bank.

In the face of the conditions as they existed, it seemed utterly preposterous that such could be the case, and yet, as Nick repeated often to himself while he was reasoning, he had selected the only explanation for the mysterious disappearance.

And now, with the dead body of the banker before him, the mystery was not cleared; it was greater and deeper than ever.

Wayne Belden had been last seen alive by his daughter.

She had looked through a window from her own room, and thus through the top half of another window in the counting room and had seen her father seated at his desk engaged in writing a letter.

That was the last that was positively known about him while he lived.

From that moment he had disappeared until now, when his dead body was found securely locked in one of his own safes in his own bank.

For just one instant it occurred to Nick Carter to visit suspicion upon the daughter; but the thought was dismissed from his mind as soon as it appeared.

And yet, if the reader will pause a moment, there were circumstances connected with the case which would have induced a man less shrewd than the detective to suspect her.

She was the last one to see him alive.

Almost immediately thereafter, according to her own story, she had descended to the library, which was the room through which her father would have been obliged to pass had he attempted to leave the bank, and she had not seen him.

She was aware of the combination of the small safe in her father's room wherein the duplicate keys were kept, and, therefore, where there was a key, not only to the door which communicated between the counting room and the bank, but also where there were duplicate keys to the street doors of the bank.

It was presumptive that inasmuch as she knew the combination of one safe, she might also know how to open others; for example, the one in which the body of her father was found.

And last, but by no means least, there was the confidential admission of her brother concerning the attentions to her of Putnam Pierce, a suitor who, in every way, was acceptable to her father, but who found no favor whatever in her own eyes.

It would not have been difficult, with a little care and perseverance, to have built up a very clear and complete circumstantial case against her; but, although Nick Carter recalled all these things and turned them over in his mind during that moment which followed upon the discovery of the body, he had already seen enough of Olive Belden to convince him that she was as innocent of complicity in the death of her father, as he was himself.

He was more than ever glad now that he had insisted upon the absence of the daughter and son of the banker during the search through the bank, since the shock of the instant discovery was thus spared to both of them; and he realized, moreover, that by reason of some intuitive process of the mind, Olive was in a measure already prepared to hear the worst concerning her father.

The effect of the discovery of the body was very different on the three men who made it.

Blake, the cashier, who was not expecting it at all, after that first exclamation of terror leaped backward and away from the safe, as if the contents were some terrible thing which he dared not touch or in any way come in contact with.

Nick Carter, who had half expected to find the body there, remained as immovable as ice, and quite as noncommittal; but he kept his eyes busy, and they shifted from one man to the other with such rapidity that it is safe to say that he did not lose an expression on the face of either of them.

Pierce appeared to be almost as stolid in the face of the discovery as Nick did.

The detective had noticed that when the cashier was working the combination, Pierce had drawn back ever so little to the rear, so that he stood, in a measure, behind both men; but at the very instant when the iron door was to be swung open, Nick had also stepped back, so that he had both men in view.

He noticed that Pierce was very pale; but that might very possibly be due entirely to the exigency of the occasion.

He had noticed, also, that Pierce kept his gloved hands clinched, as if he were under a strain of some kind; but he admitted to himself that this also might very possibly be due to the same cause; but when the door was opened and the dead body was revealed, Nick noticed that Pierce did not move a muscle, change his expression, or in any way evince any emotion whatever other than those already referred to.

This was not reasonable, the detective argued to himself. The man appeared exactly as if he were expecting some *dénouement* with the opening of that door, and had schooled himself to meet the ordeal with becoming *sang-froid*, and that, in consequence, he had overdone it.

Even as this phase of reasoning flashed through the brain of the detective, he was obliged to admit to himself that it was preposterous; but so had been his reasoning when he had figured out to himself where the body of the banker would be found.

It was only a mental shrug in which he indulged at that moment, before he turned his entire attention to the discovery that had been made; but at the same instant he resolved that he would look with great care into the life and career of Putnam Pierce.

The reader must not suppose that there was a definite reason for this.

Everybody is aware of the incontrovertible fact that ninety per cent. of the acts of our lives may be traced back to an impulse; and, after all, impulse is nothing more nor less than quick perception which often our slower power of reasoning seeks to deny.

An impulse, if it be regulated by thought and care, is usually the best of guides to human effort, especially where one does not permit inclination to have any part in the creation of that impulse.

Nick Carter was the first to step forward to remove the body from the safe, and it was Blake, not Pierce, who came to his assistance.

The latter held back, with his gloved hands thrust deeply into his trousers pockets, and with his shoulders hunched together and his head thrust forward after the manner of one who attempts to see all that is taking place without making an attempt to draw nearer.

And so Nick and Blake removed the body from the safe and placed it on the floor; and then, as Blake would have rushed toward it and doubtless have thrown himself upon the body of his employer, in the excess of grief he experienced, Nick waved him back.

"Wait a moment, Mr. Blake," he said. "This seems to be the proper time for me to make a very thorough examination of the body."

He was in the act of bending forward to do so, when he paused again, and added:

"I think, Mr. Blake, that you are the proper one to prepare Miss Belden and her brother for the shock that awaits them. If you will go to them now, Mr. Pierce will remain here with me until your return."

The detective had already discovered an inclination on the part of Pierce to leave the bank, and he selected this method to detain him.

And so they were left alone with the body presently, after Blake was gone upon his errand.

"What do you want with me?" asked Pierce, as soon as they were alone.

"Nothing whatever, Mr. Pierce, save that you act as a witness to what is discovered here," replied the detective. "There is a high stool yonder. If you will climb upon it, I will call your attention to such things as I wish you to remember."

"But this is extremely distasteful to me, Mr. Carter," expostulated Pierce. "Mr. Belden was a very dear friend of mine, and——"

"It seems to me that that is all the more reason why you should remain here to assist me all you can, in my effort to find some trace of the man who committed this awful deed."

Pierce sighed resignedly, and climbed upon the stool.

The detective paid no further attention to him, but began, in a half singsong tone, to enumerate the salient points of the conditions as he discovered them.

"If you will make a clear mental note of what I say to you," said Nick, "it will assist me, and also the coroner, in the inquiry into this affair."

"I am afraid that my memory is none too good," replied Pierce.

"Well, for once I will ask you to charge your mind with things, to the point where it will be good."

There was silence after that for some time, and at last Nick began:

"Mr. Belden was killed by a blow received on the back of his head.

"The assassin stood behind him when he struck the blow. The blow was downward and was delivered with great force; so great that the skull is crushed.

"Belden was probably seated at his desk in the counting room when the blow was struck."

"I would like to know how in——"

"Be good enough not to interrupt me, Mr. Pierce," said Nick, shortly.

Then he continued:

"He was seated at his desk in the counting room when the blow fell upon him, and he must have been engaged in writing, for his head was bent far forward at the time; this I know from the position of the wound.

"Notwithstanding the severity and the power of the blow he received, the banker was not instantly unconscious. I see that he leaped to his feet and turned to grapple with his assailant; and that he did succeed in seizing him in one spasmodic clutch before he fell dead from the effects of the blow."

"How do you know that?" demanded Pierce, unable to keep silent.

"Mr. Belden tore a link cuff button from the sleeve of his assailant," replied Nick. "I have already found one part of the link inside the counting room; the remaining half of it is here, tightly clutched in the right palm of the dead man."

"Oh!"

"The man who committed the murder was very cool and methodical about it," continued the detective, in the same singsong tone. "It is evident that he did not wish any clew to the deed to appear inside the counting room."

"Eh?" said Pierce.

Nick repeated what he had said, and added:

"My reasons for that opinion are: The force of the blow upon Belden's head, naturally made the blood flow, and this the assassin must immediately have stanched with his handkerchief, doubtless, for there is no blood in that room. Then, instantly after the deed was committed, he half dragged and half carried the body into the bank and placed it for the moment on the floor behind this safe, while he busied himself in working the combination——"

"How in he——"

"There is a spot of blood on the floor behind the safe

which escaped through the handkerchief that the assassin placed under his victim's head, while he was unlocking the safe," continued the detective, as if he had heard nothing. Then, after a short pause, he went on:

"It would appear that the assassin was not aware of the combination of this safe at the time he opened it, but——"

"Then how the devil did he open it at all?"

"But that he is an expert in the manipulation of combination lock tumblers, and possesses the talent of opening them by sound; with his ear placed closely against the dial. I am acquainted with several men who can do that: I can do it myself, so it is not an unreasonable proposition."

"I think it is damned foolishness!"

Nick appeared not to have heard the interruption.

"The safe being opened," continued the detective, "the assassin cleared a space inside for the reception of the body, and then brought it from the rear of the safe where he had placed it, and cast it inside. He was obliged to crowd it somewhat, too, in order to accommodate it to the narrow space; and he was getting anxious, now, too, for he did not act with the same deliberation he had used previously."

"Possibly there is a reason for that opinion, also," sneered Pierce.

"I have a reason for all my opinions, Mr. Pierce," replied Nick, calmly. "This particular one is that the assassin tore one of his hands quite badly on Belden's diamond stud; tore it, in fact, so badly that it bled."

CHAPTER VI.

NICK CARTER BAITS HIS LITTLE HOOK.

The detective had not appeared to look in Pierce's direction at all during this scene, although in reality he had not lost an expression of the man's face; but now he turned his eyes full upon the man. Not, however, at Pierce's face, but at his carefully gloved hands.

However, he continued that gaze only for a moment; then he permitted his eyes to return to the body of the dead man.

"To proceed," he said, calmly, as if he had discovered nothing out of the ordinary. "The assassin tore one of his hands—I am unable at the present moment to say which hand it was——"

"Isn't that remarkable, Carter?" asked Pierce, with a sneer.

"Oh, not at all, at the present stage of the inquiry. I shall know all about it presently. He tore one of his hands very badly on the stud; but there is another important thing."

"Indeed! What is that?"

"Why, at some period of the affair—probably when the link was torn from the cuff—the finger nails of the dead man's right hand tore deeply into one of the assassin's hands, and scratched it so that blood was drawn. It would not surprise me at all if the assassin had marks on both of his hands."

"May I venture to inquire how you determine that point?"

"Certainly. It is determined by the fact that beneath the nails of the first and second fingers of the right hand of the dead man there are particles of skin with some indication of blood clinging to them. It is very simple."

"Oh, very!"

"Yes; exactly; to be sure."

"I suppose you will soon be describing the general appearance of the assassin, won't you?"

"Why, yes. I can do that now. He is quite tall, for one thing. If you will draw that stool upon which you are seated, toward the safe where we found the body, you will discover the marks of three fingers in the dust that has gathered along the top of the safe. I found them there when I first entered the bank this afternoon.

"You do not care to look at them, I see; but they are there. You see, when the assassin first approached the safe with the body of the murdered man in his arms, he stopped in front of it for a moment, and steadied himself by placing one hand on the top of the safe; and you will agree with me that he must have been quite tall to have done that with ease, for—you see, I can barely reach the top of it at all."

The detective stepped across to the safe and demonstrated what he said, as he talked. Then he turned to Pierce again.

"You see, do you not? He was quite tall. As tall as you are, in fact."

He appeared to muse a moment, half veiling his eyes; and then he continued:

"He was also very strong. This body weighs something more than two hundred pounds. I have no doubt, and, being lifeless, and, therefore, limp, it was difficult to carry at all; so the man who carried it here with ease, as the assassin did, must have been quite muscular."

"You are quite a Sherlock Holmes, aren't you?"

"Sherlock Holmes, my dear sir, was a fictitious character; I am a real one. Sherlock Holmes never existed; I do."

"I don't suppose you stop there in your description of the murderer, do you?"

"Certainly not. In addition to being tall and strong, the assassin is also a man whose father or mother had red hair."

"Indeed! And what was the color of his grandfather's hair? That might be interesting."

"It might be, to be sure, for it is a fact that from some source the assassin inherited a red tinge to his hair, for in one of these particles of skin which I find under the nails of the dead man, there is a single hair of a decided

auburn tint. I should say that the hair was torn from the back of the assassin's hand."

"Why not from his mustache?"

"Well, there is a difference in the quality of hair on different parts of the body," the detective replied, exactly as if he took the question seriously.

"Then we have a gigantic, red-headed assassin, tall and powerful," was the sneering comment. "Really, Mr. Carter, you are quite wonderful in your way."

"Yes"—as if he recognized no sarcasm in the remark—"it is sometimes wonderful how nearly one may approach to the facts of a case through the aid of a few outward appearances."

"You don't happen to know the age of the assassin, do you?"

"No; not really, you know. But he is comparatively a young man, I should say. An elderly man would scarcely attempt to do what he did. And there is another thing."

"What! Another?"

"Yes; and it is quite important, too."

"You don't tell me! What is it? What can it be?"

"The assassin was quite familiar with the interior of this bank; he was familiar with this particular make of safes; he was a person who was known by sight to this neighborhood; doubtless he was personally known to many of the employees of the bank; doubtless he was also known personally to the members of the banker's family."

"Let me see; that is four things instead of one, isn't it?"

"Quite so, Mr. Pierce, but they all tend to the same point, which is that he had provided himself with keys to the street doors of the bank; that he was aware of the habits of the banker and particularly of that one which took him to his counting room every Sunday afternoon; that he was aware of the fact that there was a heavy, gold-headed cane in the rack——"

"A cane? What cane?"

"The cane with which the murder was committed."

"You have said nothing about a cane until now."

"Have I not? Oh, yes; that is true. I had forgotten that you did not know."

"Know what?"

"That the murder was committed with a gold-headed cane which always stood in the rack inside the counting room, near the door which opens into the bank.

"You see," continued Nick, with scarcely a perceptible pause, "the assassin must have been familiar with the arrangement of the counting room. He knew, for example, that the rack was just inside the door; he knew that the heavy cane was always in the rack; he knew he would find it there, for he was aware of the fact that the banker not only never touched the cane himself, but never permitted others to do so; he knew that it was the habit of the banker to spend his Sunday afternoons in the writing of personal letters at his desk; he knew that the banker was rather hard of hearing and that he was also somewhat nearsighted, so that he was in the habit of bending his head very low over his paper when he was engaged in writing; he knew that if he previously unlocked the door between the bank and the counting room, he would be able to push it ajar without attracting the banker's attention; he knew that by bending his body low, he could then enter the counting room without being observed."

"Really——"

"And that is just what he did do, you see. He entered as I have said. He passed around the room close to the wall after he had taken the cane from the rack, and when he had secured a position behind the banker, he rose upright and dealt the blow.

"But even that is not all he did to tell how well he was acquainted with his surroundings."

"Not really?"

"No; for after he had killed his man—after he had brought him into the bank and deposited the body in the safe—after all that, it was still important that he should leave the bank in safety and leave no trace behind him."

"I should say that it was highly important, from his point of view."

"Exactly. Yes. Now, Mr. Pierce, he could not have done that in safety—in fact, he would not have been inclined to have considered the doing of it at all, had he not been a person who was not only known by sight in the neighborhood, but who was also one who would be considered to be above suspicion. Now, what would you have done under the circumstances, had you been in the assassin's shoes, Mr. Pierce?"

"Eh? What is that? Really, I cannot go to the extent of even conjecturing."

Nick smiled benignantly.

"That is because your talents lie directly in another channel," he said, in the simplest and most confiding manner in the world. "Now, I have taken pains to develop that instinct."

"I can readily understand that you would do so."

"I will tell you what I would have done had I been in the assassin's place, and were known in this neighborhood, as he must be know."

"Well?"

Although Pierce was evidently trying to conceal the fact that he was interested, by adopting a veneering of indifference and sarcasm, Nick saw that he was interested; and now he advanced two steps nearer to Pierce as he continued:

"Consider, for a moment, that I am standing here, after having committed the murder. I have just deposited the body of my victim in the safe and relocked the door. I have not discovered, as yet, that one of the links is missing from my cuff. I hold the gold-headed cane in

my hand—the cane with which the crime was committed. I have thrust the handkerchief with which I stanched the flow of blood from my victim's head, into one of my pockets. I have a key to one of those street doors in my possession. I have looked carefully around me, and am of the opinion that everything here is in its proper place and that I have left no trace behind me of the deed I have done. I am, in a word, ready to take my departure. Do you follow me, Mr. Pierce?"

"Oh, perfectly. Quite so. Yes."

"For the moment I forget that I really should leave the cane where I found it—in the rack in the counting room. My only idea now is to get away from the bank."

"Yes?" There was some display of eagerness in the manner of the man on the stool now.

"I repeat that I forget for the moment the significance of the cane, and it does not really occur to me until I am outside the bank with the door locked behind me. However, I am anticipating."

"I should think you were; with a vengeance."

"The vengeance will come in later on, Mr. Pierce. But this is what I would do under such circumstances and in the face of such surroundings."

"Well?"

"I would approach the outer door to which I had obtained a key; I would unlock that door very silently and carefully; I would open it the merest crack, and I would listen intently for the sound of footsteps or wheels on the pavement outside.

"By doing that, I would select a moment when I was sure that nobody would observe me, and in that moment I would open the door sufficiently so that I could withdraw the key from the inside, and replace it in the lock on the outside; after that I would resume the listening.

"When the next opportunity came, I would open the door quickly, just wide enough to permit me to pass; I would then step outside and close the door as quickly behind me.

"If I considered then that I had sufficient time, I would withdraw the key and put it in my pocket, after which I would ostentatiously scratch a match against the stone wall of the building and light a cigar.

"Next, choosing my opportunity, I would step quickly to the sidewalk, instantly turning so that I would face the building, and I would retain that attitude for several moments, as if something about the condition of the building interested me; and presently I would stroll leisurely away—in the opposite direction from the banker's residence."

There was leaning a little forward by this time, and, unknown to himself, he appeared to be hanging breathlessly upon the detective's words.

"I would like to know why the devil you would do all that," he exclaimed, finally.

"Why, so that in case I was observed near the bank at that hour by any person who knew me, I would be able to testify that I was passing it at the time, that I stopped for a moment to ignite a match against the stonework and light a cigar, and that at the time I fancied I heard a noise of some sort proceeding from inside the building.

"I would not be able precisely to describe that noise, but I would somehow succeed in creating the impression that it was a cry, or that it sounded like a blow. You see, that would explain why I stopped there at that particular time, and since I was careful to permit nobody to see me come out of the bank, that would be all that would be necessary."

"You build up——"

"I have not quite finished yet. You have forgotten that I still hold the cane in my hand. I would then suddenly discover that I had it.

"Now, Mr. Pierce, the possession of that cane would be the most damaging evidence that could be obtained against me, and, therefore, I would take instant measures to rid myself of it."

"How would you do that?"

"I have not determined as yet. Different men would employ different methods; I think my own might possibly be to carry it to the river and throw it in; but I am not sure. There is one thing, however, that I would do at once."

"And what might that be?"

"I would get away from there with the cane as soon as possible."

"Oh, yes; of course."

"And in going away, I would remember that I had the blood-stained handkerchief in one of my pockets; I would discover that my hands were cut and bleeding somewhat, and I would find that one of the links from my cuffs was missing. These discoveries would take me to my own home as quickly as possible."

"I think, Mr. Carter, that you might quite successfully adopt the profession of an assassin, you seem to know the ropes so perfectly."

"Doubtless. But to continue."

"By all means."

"Having arrived at my rooms, I would probably burn the handkerchief at once. Next, I would conceal the cane and the remaining link of my cuff buttons in some secure place, preparatory to ridding myself of them altogether. Next, I would change my clothing throughout, even to hat and shoes. I would express some strong opinions concerning the wounds on my hands, and, finding that, in spite of frequent bathing, the wound still showed plainly, I would put on a pair of gloves, preparatory to going out again."

"So you would go out again, eh?"

"Certainly. I would wish to be seen and talked to at several places on the street, and in several houses as

well. I should seek the vicinity of the bank itself. If I were known to the banker's family, I even think that I would venture to call there."

Pierce burst out suddenly into rather discordant laughter.

"Upon my word, Carter, you would make a crackerjack as a professional murderer," he said.

"Yes, indeed! I haven't a doubt of it. And you—— Do you think you could succeed at it also, Mr. Pierce?"

"Well, really, you know I don't think that my talents tend that way."

"No? Nevertheless, you will admit that it is an interesting study, will you not?"

"Deeply interesting—if only there were a grain or two of logic to support your theories."

"My dear sir, don't misunderstand me, I beg. These are not theories at all. I was merely rehearsing what I would do, personally, were I the murderer. You, no doubt, would act very differently."

CHAPTER VII.

WHO COULD HAVE BEEN THE MURDERER?

It was at this interesting moment that Thomas Blake returned to the bank and Nick heard him rapping for admittance at the counting-room door.

The detective hastened to admit him, and was pleased when he discovered that the cashier had returned alone.

"I succeeded in persuading Miss Belden and her brother to remain in the house for the moment," he said. "I have assured them that I would attend to everything, with your assistance, Mr. Carter, and both have consented not to attempt to see the body of their father until it is properly prepared for burial. Don't you think that the best way?"

"Decidedly."

"I thought that perhaps Mr. Pierce would consent to go after the coroner for us. His automobile is at the door; and that at the same time he would bring the undertaker back with him. I would like to get the body into the parlor of the house as soon as possible."

"Certainly," exclaimed Pierce, with alacrity; and he departed on his double errand without delay.

Nick ushered him through the counting room, but the detective did not return immediately to the bank.

Instead, he paused for a moment at the telephone and called up his own house.

"Chick?" he asked, when the answer came.

"Yes."

"I am at the Belden National Bank, in Thirty-fourth Street. A man named Putnam Pierce has just left here in his automobile, to go after the coroner and the undertaker. He cannot possibly return here inside half an hour, and I want you to be outside the bank by that time, also in an automobile, prepared to follow him everywhere he goes."

"All right."

"Take Ten-Ichi and Patsy both with you as passengers. Fix yourselves up so that you won't any of you be known, and whatever happens I must know exactly what Pierce does and where he goes, from now until I call you off. All three of you are assigned to the one man, and you will work together or separately, as the case may be, until further orders."

The detective returned to the bank then.

He found Blake standing over the body of his dead employer, and there were tears in the cashier's eyes.

"You were fond of him, were you not?" asked Nick.

"I loved him and he loved me, Mr. Carter. This is a greater blow to me than I know how to describe."

"I can well understand that, Mr. Blake, and I think you can help me to find the murderer."

"I, sir?"

"Yes; because of your intimacy with Mr. Belden. You perceive, do you not, that this is no commonplace crime?"

"Yes, sir; I think I do."

"No everyday affair."

"Indeed not."

"We have not investigated as yet to discover if any robbery was committed, but if we find that there was I shall still be of the opinion that there was a deeper and more deadly motive than that for this crime."

"And I also, sir, even if the bank were gutted from top to bottom."

"I shall ask you presently to examine the safes upon the question of robbery, but just at present I wish to touch upon other matters."

"Very well, sir."

"I was not acquainted with Mr. Belden; in fact, I am not certain that I ever saw him at all, but I have decided in my own mind that he was somewhat deaf. Am I correct about that?"

"Yes, he was quite deaf at times. More so at some times than at others. It was a catarrhal affection, I think. If he were looking directly at you when you spoke to him he invariably heard you plainly, but if his head were turned the other way you frequently had to repeat what you said quite loudly."

"I had supposed that. Now tell me, was he also near-sighted?"

"Quite."

"He appears not to have been in the habit of wearing glasses."

"That was a peculiarity of his, Mr. Carter. He used to say that his nose was not built for eyeglasses, and that he'd be da——blowed—if he would wear spectacles. It was largely a matter of personal pride with him."

"Exactly. Now, Mr. Blake, have you any person in mind who, given the opportunity, might have had a real or a fancied reason to do this thing?"

"Upon my honor I have not."

"Do you know of any man with whom he had business relations who has threatened him at any time?"

"I do not."

"Do you know of any man whom he is supposed to have wronged in any way? In business, or in his home, or personally?"

"No, sir."

"Do you know of any professed enemy of his?"

"Only one, and I happen to know where that man is."

"Who is he and where is he?"

"His name is Simeon Drake. He is at present in Australia."

"How do you know that he is there?"

"For the reason that I have a brother in Sydney to whom I wrote some time ago, asking him to see Mr. Drake and secure from him certain papers of importance to me. Only yesterday I received a cable from my brother in which he said that he had seen Drake that day and had secured the papers."

"Then, if that is all correct, Drake is out of the question."

"Without a doubt. And besides, Drake is not a man who would or could do this thing, even if he were here to do it, which I know he is not."

"Then we will dismiss him from our conjectures. Do you know anything about the gold-headed cane which has stood for a long time in the rack in the counting room?"

"I know all about it."

"Will you tell me what you know about it?"

"It used to belong to Drake. Drake stole, or rather defrauded, Belden out of a large sum of money. The last time he was here he left the cane when he went away. Belden kept it forever before his eyes as a reminder of the perfidy of one man. That is the whole story about it."

"And Drake is not in this country. It is well for him that he is not, perhaps."

"What has the cane to do with the matter, Mr. Carter?"

"It was the weapon with which your friend was killed."

"Really?"

"Yes, really." Now, Mr. Blake, have you stopped to realize that the man who committed this crime possessed a key to one of the street doors of the bank, and another one which fitted the lock in the counting-room door?"

"I have not realized anything at all, sir, save that my friend is dead and was murdered."

"I understand. But now I wish you to take your mind from the consideration of Mr. Belden and to apply it solely to what we have to do."

"I will make the effort."

"How many keys are there in existence that you know about to those street doors?"

"In the first place, Mr. Carter, the locks on those two doors are the same. The same key opens either of the doors."

"Well?"

"I have a key. Mr. Belden had a key. The paying teller, who is my son, has one, and there is one more which is kept locked in a small safe in Belden's sleeping room."

"And that is all?"

"That is all."

"Have you your key with you at the present moment?"

"Yes; here it is."

"Where is your son?"

"At home. We live in the same house, for I live with him since I lost my wife."

"Do you know if he has his key in his possession?"

"I happened to see it not three hours ago, sir. I was seated in his room looking over the morning papers when he entered to change his trousers. I saw him place the contents of the pockets on a side table while he did so, and the key was among them."

"That, then, accounts for three of the keys, for I have already examined the pockets of Mr. Belden and have discovered his key there. We have now only to consider the fourth, which is the one in the safe in Belden's sleeping room."

"Yes."

"Now, as to the keys to the counting-room door. I refer to the door between that room and the bank."

"I understand."

"How many keys are there to that door which you know about?"

"The same number."

"Possessed by the same men?"

"Yes, precisely; with an extra one in the small safe in the house."

"Have you yours? And has your son his?"

"Yes, to both questions."

"And Belden's is here, while I know that the fourth is now in the lock of the door, for it is the one that Miss Belden took from the safe in her father's room. There must have been a fifth, you see."

"I have never heard of one, sir."

"A fifth key, or a very clever skeleton key, or a picklock something after the pattern of my own. Wait a moment and let me see if my picklock will open that counting-room door."

The detective went to the door and after a moment returned.

"The lock on that door is very simple," he said. "Any expert might have opened it without trouble; and so we are to conclude that the murderer did that very thing; in short, that he is an expert at opening locks. I have already tried my instrument on the street doors and I find that they cannot be picked in the usual way."

"No; those locks are complicated."

"So the murderer has somehow possessed himself of a key that would fit those locks."

"That is evident; and is it not also evident that he knew the combination of this safe?"

"No. I don't think that he was aware of that combination."

"Why not? And if not, how did he open the safe?"

"To the first of your questions I will reply that the man took the trouble to put down his burden behind the safe, while he was manipulating the combination lock. He would scarcely have done that, using all the care he exercised, had he known the combination. As it was, he wished to have all his faculties free to use, and moreover he wished to get upon his knees before the safe door in order to place his ear against the lock."

"You think he opened the door by ear, then?"

"I am positive of it."

"Then he must be a safe expert."

"Undoubtedly."

"I know that the safe companies keep men in their employ who can do that sort of thing; but all such men are well known, and are usually thoroughly trustworthy. At least, I am confident that not one of them could have done this deed."

"Granted; but somebody did it; and the man who did do it is a lock expert. And so, you see, we must look around for a man who could have done it, don't you?"

"Yes; I understand that."

"I think now that we will look through the other safes to see if anything is stolen, if you will be so kind, and after that I will have more questions to ask you on quite another subject," said the detective.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF A PAIR OF GLOVES.

One after another the remaining safes in the bank were opened—that is, all save the one that was controlled by a time lock—and with the result that they discovered that a robbery had been committed.

From the safe adjoining that in which the body was found, a considerable sum of money, aggregating thirteen thousand dollars, had been taken.

The cashier explained that sometimes insignificant sums of money were placed in these safes, when for some reason it was not possible to deposit it with the rest of the cash, in the vault safe, which was operated with the time lock.

From the second safe that they examined a quantity of jewelry was missing, and the cashier explained that that was his own personal property which he had placed there for security. The value of the missing jewelry was, he said, about ten thousand dollars.

Nothing else had been taken, although they made a thorough examination; and at the conclusion of the search Nick Carter seated himself on the stool lately occupied by Putnam Pierce, while the detective was having sport with him, if such an incongruous term can be used under the circumstances.

"It is my opinion," he said, "that the murderer merely amused himself in opening those safes before the murder was committed."

"Why before the commission of the crime?" asked the cashier.

"Well, I figure it out in this way. He doubtless entered the bank early in the morning, at a time when he could best approach it without being observed. It was his intention to wait here near the counting-room door until he heard Mr. Belden enter the counting room."

"If he did that, he was very cool and methodical about it, wasn't he?"

"He seems to have been remarkably cool and methodical about everything he did."

"That is true."

"Perhaps he had a paper with him, to while away the time before he committed his crime, and when he had finished with the paper, there being nothing else to do, he determined to open one of the safes for the reception of the body when he should have killed Belden."

"The mere suggestion of it makes me shudder with horror."

"It might well do so. But to proceed."

"Yes."

"He opened this one and found the cash; he thought he might as well possess himself of that and so he stuffed it in his pockets. It was paper money, I suppose?"

"Yes."

"But he discovered that the safe was so filled with books and packages that there was not room inside for the body; so he closed it again and attacked the next on to it."

"Well?"

"There he found the jewelry, which he also absorbed; and, as in the preceding case, he discovered that there was no room in the safe for the accommodation of the body."

"That is true."

"So he closed it again, and was about to attack the safe where we did find the body, when he was disturbed by some sound. We will say that he heard the banker enter the counting room, which was probably the case."

"Yes."

"Well, that accounts for his being obliged to put the body down while he opened the other safe, doesn't it?"

"Yes; but will you tell me one thing?"

"I will if I can."

"Why should he have taken the trouble to put the body in the safe at all, since he must have known that it would be found in the morning?"

"There are several reasons, any one of which would account for it."

"I will confess that I do not see any good reason at all."

"In the first place, Mr. Blake, he would not leave the body where it fell—in the counting room, because, if he had done that, the fact that the crime had been committed would have been discovered too soon to suit him."

"I can understand that."

"In the second place, he was probably aware that there was a duplicate key to the counting-room door in the house, and he foresaw that Olive would secure it and search the bank for her father the moment she missed him."

"True. True."

"Again, that would have involved a discovery of what had happened too soon to suit his ideas, as well as possibly too soon for his entire safety."

"I see it now."

"There was no place to conceal the body save in one of the safes. If there had been no room for its reception in this last safe, as was the case in the others, he doubtless would have left it where he first put it—behind the safe."

"Yes."

"Now there is still another reason, which is also a good one. It is described by the one word, egotism."

"I don't think that I quite understand you now."

"All criminals are egotists. All take pride in their own particular methods. All enjoy the wrapping of a cloak of mystery around their simplest acts. Frequently they do this, not so much for the sake of escaping detection, as for the love of proving that they can do it. I think in this case that the criminal made some sort of a wager with himself concerning the time when the truth about the crime would be discovered; I mean, concerning the time when it would be known positively that Mr. Belden was dead."

"What a monster!"

"So, you see, there were plenty of incentives for him to conceal the body in the safe."

"Yes; I see it very plainly now."

"He did the stealing only because he discovered the things to steal. I do not think that the desire to steal had anything whatever to do with the murder. That, I am convinced, was a premeditated deed."

"What were the other things concerning which you wished to question me, Mr. Carter?"

"Oh, they were for the most part, questions of a general character. I think I will begin by asking you to tell me how well you know Mr. Putnam Pierce."

"I know him only as one knows a person he is in the habit of seeing almost daily."

"Do you mean that he is in the habit of visiting this bank daily?"

"Yes."

"Does he keep an account here?"

"Yes."

"A large one?"

"Quite a large one; he is a rich man, you know. He is reputed to be worth above the two-million mark."

"Indeed! Has it been his habit to draw daily against his account here?"

"Oh, I don't know as to that, exactly."

"Then I am to understand that his frequent calls here were more in the line of a personal character?"

"Why, yes; that is, he has been in the habit of coming frequently to see Mr. Belden."

"The room which we know as the counting room has been used somewhat in the nature of a private office, has it not?"

"That is, in effect, exactly what it is; a private office."

"The regular room for the president—what you call the president's room—is that one at the front of the building?"

"Yes."

"Where did Belden spend the greater part of his time? In the president's room, or in the counting room?"

"I should say in the latter. Of course he was a great deal in the president's room, but I have always noticed that when he was not occupied there he would retire to the counting room. He seemed to prefer it."

"And now, when Mr. Pierce came to see him, which of these rooms did they use more than the other?"

"Oh, the counting room. Whenever Pierce came into the bank he and Belden almost invariably retired to the counting room. In fact, when Pierce came in at any time he discovered that Mr. Belden was occupied in the president's room, or in any part of the bank, it has been his habit to nod a recognition and to pass on through the bank into the counting room without waiting to be told to do so."

"Have they always seemed to you to be good friends?"

"The very best of friends; yes, sir."

"What are your personal feelings toward Mr. Pierce?"

"I don't know that I have any at all."

"Which is a negative way of saying that you do not like him."

"Well, to be entirely frank with you, I do not; although I must in justice to him admit that I have no good reason to dislike him."

"Your dislike for him is, then, intuitive."

"I suppose that is what one might call it."

"Do you know if he and Mr. Belden had any business arrangements together."

"I do not know of any. I have never heard that they had."

"Did you know that Pierce was a suitor for the hand of Olive Belden?"

"Oh, yes. Olive does not like him, however, any better than I do myself."

"But he seemed to satisfy Mr. Belden's ideas, did he not?"

"I think so."

"Were Belden and Pierce in the habit of remaining closeted in the counting room for long at a time?"

"Oh, yes; frequently."

"You have no idea, of course, what they found to talk about?"

"Certainly not."

"Did their conversation appear to be of a private nature?"

"Why, yes; often it did; but really, Mr. Carter, you must excuse me, but I cannot see what all this extrinsic matter has to do with the crime."

"Well, I will admit that they do seem to be just about as far apart as the North Pole and that compass which dangles from your watch chain. And yet, if you should raise that compass in your hand and hold it so that it would be level the needle inside would point toward the north."

"Good heavens, Mr. Carter, you do not mean, do you, that you are attempting to associate Putnam Pierce with this murder?"

"I may associate you with it, or myself, or Miss Olive, or the son Frank, or the mikado of Japan, if I discover that by doing any one of these things I will obtain even a glimmer of information that will be inclined to put me on the right track."

"Ah! I think I understand you now. Your questions, while seeming to be aimed at Mr. Pierce, are really aimed at the habits and associations of Mr. Belden."

"Possibly that is correct. We will let it go at that, anyway. Do you happen to know where Mr. Pierce lives?"

"Yes; in Madison Avenue, not far from here;" and Blake mentioned the number of the house.

"Did you notice the gloves he wore when he was here to-day?" asked Nick.

"Yes, certainly."

"Why did you notice them?"

"Eh? What is that?"

"Why did you notice them?"

"Why, because he wore them, I suppose. Usually he carries a pair of them in his hand, with his cane. I suppose that is why."

"Exactly. That is why. Thank you."

"Mr. Carter, you are very puzzling at times."

"Yes; I suppose so. And there are others. Putnam Pierce, for instance."

CHAPTER IX.

THE MAN WHO COMMITTED THE CRIME WAS ——?

"That was a happy thought of yours to send him after the coroner and the undertaker," continued the detective, after a short pause. "It was because you had noticed that he had an automobile in front of the house, I suppose."

"Yes; partly that."

"Did you notice if he had a chauffeur with him, or was he alone with the machine?"

"He always carries a chauffeur. He never operates the machine himself."

"Ah, indeed! Well, speaking of chauffeurs and automobiles, I think I hear one outside now. Would you mind admitting them if it happens to be Pierce with the coroner; and, by the way, it will be just as well to say nothing about this conversation of ours, and also to withhold all information about the money and jewels that were stolen."

"Very well, sir."

"Also, induce Pierce to come in here again, if possible, even if you have to go to the extent of telling him that I wish to see him, although I would rather you would not do that unless it is really necessary; and when he does come in here, manage to keep him a moment or two after you see me slip outside."

The coroner and the undertaker, followed by the cashier and Putnam Pierce, entered the bank by way of the counting room a few moments later, and Nick, perceiving that Blake had carried out his instructions and appeared to be talking interestedly with Pierce, passed them, and went into the counting room, closing and locking the door after him, for he had no desire that Pierce should take a notion into his head to follow him immediately.

And the detective went directly to the street and to the chauffeur.

"Do you know what has happened inside the bank?" he asked of that individual.

"Yes; Mr. Pierce told me about it."

"Did he also tell you that you were to say nothing about it to others?"

"No, he didn't mention that; but I won't, if that is what you came out to say."

"All right. Here! Have a cigar? They are very good ones. What in the world made you so long a time in bringing the coroner here? Did you have to wait for him?"

"No. He was there at his home all right when we got there."

"What made you so long, then?"

"We went around and stopped at the house for a few minutes, first. Mr. Pierce wanted something that was there."

"Oh! That was it, eh? Fine evening, isn't it?"

"Yes; fine."

"So long," said Nick; and he turned away and re-entered the bank.

But there was a grim smile on his face as he did so, for he had noticed two things during that short interview with the chauffeur.

The first and most important was that Pierce had swallowed the bait he had given him and had gone to his house, and gone inside, before he went after the coroner and the undertaker; and the other was that there was an-

'other automobile drawn up at the curb not far away, and he knew that the other machine contained his own three assistants.

When he reëntered the bank after unlocking the counting-room door, he encountered Pierce just beyond it, and he was already on his way out, having missed the detective.

"Are you leaving us, Mr. Pierce?" he asked, genially.

"Yes; I just recalled the fact that I have an engagement, and have only just about time to keep it. However, I will remain if there is anything in which I can be of service here."

"I don't think there is. You might ask Mr. Blake."

"I just asked him and he said no."

"Then surely there is nothing to detain you. Mr. Blake will take charge of everything, I suppose, and there are relatives of the family who will be called in. Good-night."

But as Pierce passed out through the house, Nick kept rather close behind him, and at the front door he drew the butler back into the hall while he went out upon the steps himself.

Pierce did not turn around and therefore did not know that the detective was anywhere near him; and Nick heard him say to the chauffeur:

"Did somebody come out of the house to talk to you a moment ago?"

"Yes. An officer, I guess it was."

"What did he want?"

"Why, he only asked me if you had told me to say nothing about the murder, and when I told him that you had not, he cautioned me not to speak about it. That is all."

"Was that all he asked you?"

"Yes, sir. He seemed to have that on his mind."

"Humph!" said Pierce; and then the automobile dashed away through the streets.

The detective returned to the bank again. But he remained only a moment.

The coroner had already "viewed" the body and had given his permission to have it removed to the house, so there was nothing more for the detective to do there.

He therefore walked out with the coroner, after leaving a message for Olive to the effect that he would call upon her in the morning.

Outside, the coroner and the detective paused for a moment together at the corner.

"It is a sad case," said Nick, by way of opening the conversation.

"It looks to me like about the most wanton murder I have known about," was the coroner's reply.

"It was the blow on the back of the head that killed him, of course——"

"It would have killed an ox. The skull is crushed in."

"Yes; I saw that."

"It must have been an iron bar that felled him."

"No: it was an ebony cane, which is about the same thing. Good-night, coroner."

The detective recalled the number of the house in which Putnam Pierce resided, and he elected to walk around that way on his journey homeward.

Save for a light in the lower hall, there was no sign of life about the interior of the house that could be observed from the outside as the detective passed it.

"It is a strange thing," he mused to himself as he passed on, "how that man impressed me from the very first moment I saw him. He may be as innocent as an angel in heaven, but I'll swear that I believe him to be the only man who was situated so that he could have committed this crime.

"I suppose I should have stopped at the house long enough to have investigated that question of the remaining key, which is unaccounted for, to the street door of the bank, but I did hesitate to intrude upon poor Olive Belden just now; and the facts about the key can wait until morning.

"Putnam Pierce," he mused on. "Putnam Pierce. It is rather strange, Mr. Putnam Pierce, how you have got yourself mixed up in my reasoning powers to-night.

"Let me see what I have got against you, anyhow.

"You were a little bit unnatural during the time that we passed together alone inside the bank, for one thing. You were too sarcastic; too eager about some things and not eager enough about some others; too self-contained when we discovered the body.

"Now, the man who committed that crime had to possess a key to that front door; you are the only person, so far as I know at present, who was situated so that you might have gotten possession of one, or have secured an impression of the key and had one made.

"The man who committed that crime knew all about the habits of the banker; and nobody could have been more familiar with Wayne Belden's habits than Putnam Pierce.

"The man who committed that crime knew that the gold-headed cane was always in the rack beside the door in the counting room! Putnam Pierce again.

"The man who committed that crime knew that Belden was nearsighted and deaf! Putnam Pierce again.

"The man who committed that crime had no fear because of the likelihood that he might be seen near the bank as he was leaving it, because he could readily explain his presence there at any time! Putnam Pierce.

"The man who committed that crime is an expert with combination locks, and that is about the only thing which does not count against Putnam Pierce; and it may do that yet, when I have had an opportunity to investigate him a little.

"I wonder where he made his fortune, anyway. I wonder where he got it. I wish I had thought to ask Blake.

"And now, Putnam Pierce, why did you go home before you went after the coroner and the undertaker? Was

it because I had worried you a little by my talk about the cane and the link, and the wounded hand, and all that?

"I wonder if that cane and that link and the blood-stained handkerchief were all the time at your house, and if you thought that the very best time to rid yourself of them was while you knew me to be shut up in the bank with Thomas Blake?

"It looks a little that way. It does, indeed.

"If only I had dared to question that chauffeur a little more closely; but I couldn't do that without putting you on your guard, Putnam Pierce; and it is too soon to do that.

"Putnam Pierce. Putnam Pierce. Confound him! I almost wish that he had not called there at the banker's home this afternoon; but the very fact that he did call there argues against him."

The detective came to an abrupt halt in this train of thought, and smiled grimly to himself. Then he added, half aloud:

"If this isn't an absolute departure from my usual methods, nothing could be. Here I am—I, who pride myself that I never allow myself to suspect a man of a crime until I know something which lends strength to that suspicion, going off half cocked and at a tangent, and in my own mind practically convicting Putnam Pierce of this crime.

"And yet, who else could have committed it?

"One of the servants of the household? The idea is absurd.

"The son Frank? Not to be thought of.

"The daughter Olive? Nobody could look into her eyes and listen to her voice and harbor such a thought as that for a single moment.

"A business associate whom Belden may have wronged? Possibly; but where will be found such a man, who, in addition, possessed the necessary opportunities and adjuncts to the crime.

"An acquaintance who has been personally wronged by the banker? The same objection applies.

"An ordinary cracksman? Out of the question, because such a man would have left traces of his profession behind him; such a man would have taken much more from those safes than the murderer took; and he would not have departed from the bank without making an assault on the big safe; nor would he have gone to all that trouble to have killed the banker, for he would much rather have avoided contact with him at all.

"A crank? A crazy man? Somebody with a fancied wrong? The thought is not consistent, for the reason that such an individual could not have done the job so scientifically.

"An employee of the bank? Well, that might be possible; but a little investigation on that point will establish it affirmatively or negatively in a few hours.

"And so, I am brought back again to Putnam Pierce.

"But if Pierce did it, where is the motive?

"Pierce is a suitor for Olive's hand; the father approved of his suit, while the daughter does not; and here is the antithesis of a motive for Pierce to kill the banker.

"The generally accepted rule in cases of this kind is 'Find your motive and you discover your criminal;' but it looks to me as if this was a case of find the criminal first and you will wring the motive out of him."

He was silent after that until he reached his home, where he went at once to his study.

And there he seated himself to await the arrival of one of his assistants, for he was entirely of the opinion that their pursuit of Pierce in the automobile would not be uneventful, and that, as soon as something did happen which was worth reporting, Chick would send one of the younger assistants to the detective to report.

And in this idea he was not mistaken, for after little more than an hour of waiting the door opened and Patsy hastily entered the room.

Without a word, the young assistant stepped forward and placed a package on the table, and then, quickly unfolding it, he disclosed to Nick Carter's view a gold-headed ebony cane, a blood-stained handkerchief, a link cuff button set with a turquoise and two diamonds, and a pair of yellow kid gloves turned wrong side out, to show that the inside was stained with blood.

CHAPTER X.

THE LAIR OF A PROFESSIONAL CRACKSMAN.

The eyes of the detective glistened with pleasure when his gaze fell upon the articles described; but he only motioned Patsy to a chair and then leaned back in his own without making any effort to obtain a nearer view of the things.

When Patsy was on the point of speaking, Nick held up one hand to indicate that he desired nothing so much as silence, just at that moment, and when at last he spoke, it was in a far-away, dreamy manner, like one who recalls an incident which the sight of some article has suggested.

"Patsy," he said, "before you tell me anything about the history of the recovery of these several articles, let me try if I can describe it to you. You see, lad, if I can do that—if the things were found exactly as I think they must have been—why, then, almost to a dead certainty, I am right in my suspicions; and the strange part of it all is, Pat, that for once in my life I have permitted my suspicions to get away with my caution, and I have fallen on top of one man, tooth and nail—metaphorically, of course.

"Of course I already know that somehow your pursuit of Putnam Pierce has led you to the recovery of these things, but I cannot exactly see why he did not dispose of them—if he had them at all—in a manner which would preclude the possibility of their recovery by you, or by anybody else.

"Now, there remains no doubt in my own mind that he is the murderer. That is point one.

"Accepting that as a fact, for the sake of the argument, it follows that when I left the bank to go outside and talk to Pierce's chauffeur, these articles were at that very moment in the automobile, waiting to be disposed of. In other words, when Pierce was sent after the coroner and the undertaker, I already know that he went first to his own house. Therefore he went there to procure these things, and not caring to delay in his errand after the coroner, he merely concealed them inside his automobile until he could dispose of them later on.

"When I went out there to talk with the chauffeur I saw you and Ten-Ichi and Chick in another automobile, waiting for Pierce to show up, and, of course, when he did appear, you followed him.

"Now there are only two places where he might have driven his machine in order safely to have disposed of these things without being obliged to leave the tonneau, or he must have taken you either across one of the bridges to Brooklyn, or on a ferryboat.

"The latter place would have possessed disadvantages over the former, so I am inclined to think that he made for one of the bridges.

"If he did that, he waited until he got almost to the middle of the span over the river, and then, his machine being close to the rail and the bundle because of the cane inside it, being sufficiently heavy, he could have tossed it over the rail into the river without rising from his seat.

"Still, if he had done that, it would have been next to impossible for you to have recovered the package at all, or having recovered it somehow, it would have been soaked with water so——"

"May I speak now?" asked Patsy.

"Yes; go ahead."

"You have described exactly what he did do."

"Have I, indeed?"

"Yes."

"But why isn't the package wet?"

"Because it did not touch the water."

"How is that?"

"There was a little bit of ill fortune for him and good fortune for us that stepped in between and prevented it."

"What was it?"

"When we followed his machine upon the bridge we were, of course, watching his every move closely."

"Sure."

"Chick saw the motion he made when he tossed the package over the rail and was out of our own machine almost before the package left his hand. We all saw the package in the air as it flew over toward the river, but Chick was already against the railing with his head sticking through it. He wanted to see where that package struck the water, you see."

"Sure; and mark the hole where it went down, I suppose," laughed Nick.

"Well, as it happened, he didn't have to do that, for it made no hole. You see there happened to be a boat passing under the bridge at that very moment. In watching the descent of the package toward the river, Chick saw that it struck on the top of the pilot house of the boat. He could not determine whether it remained there or bounded off into the water, but he did recognize the boat, even in the darkness, for the reason that there is not another craft like her in New York harbor."

"Eh? What boat was it?"

"The fireboat, *New Yorker*."

"By Jove! That was luck."

"Luck? It was fate, chief. The *New Yorker* was headed toward her station at Pier A, near Castle Garden.

If she had been going north we would not have known where to look for her; but being bound south at that point, we knew that she was headed for her station."

"Surely."

"Chick turned and leaped back into the machine. Then, 'Quick, Patsy!' he said to me. 'It landed on top of the pilot house of the *New Yorker*. She is on her way to her station at Pier A. Get there first if you can.'

"Well, I didn't need any urging, and I did get there first; only a minute or so, to be sure, but it was enough. The pilot, McCarty, had heard the thing strike on the roof of the pilot house, but had forgotten all about it by the time he arrived at his station. I found the package where it fell, and there it is."

"And Chick and Ten-Ichi are still on the trail of the other automobile, I suppose?"

"Yes."

The detective leaned forward and picked up the cuff link which had been securely wrapped in the handkerchief.

"It is the mate of the one I found on the floor of the counting room," he mused aloud.

Next he took the handkerchief in his hand and devoted several moments to that. It was stained with blood, and, what was still more important, it bore the name of Pierce in one corner.

"It is rather strange that he did not think to cut out that name," said the detective. "I suppose he thought it was really not important, because he believed that the handkerchief would never be found."

Then he took the heavy cane in his hand and examined that.

The head of the cane was a round knob of solid gold and was therefore very weighty. The cane itself was rather large, and also of unusual heft.

The gold head was chased, and, around the circumference of it, was milled like a coin, and to this part of it had clung several hairs which were unmistakably like the hair on the dead banker's head; and there were two stains of blood with it.

The gloves?

They had been turned wrong side out, and there were several almost indistinguishable stains upon them which might have been made from the bleeding of a slight wound on the hands that had worn them; and on turning them back again to their natural position, the detective at once recognized them as the same gloves he had seen on the hands of Putnam Pierce while he talked with him at the bank.

"I hope that Chick will see far enough ahead to follow the chauffeur after Pierce has dismissed him for the night," he mused. "I should like to have a few moments conversation with him. I hope Chick will bring him here."

"This has been a good night's work," said Patsy, smiling.

"Good? It is the best I ever had. Out of almost nothing has grown a perfect case. From the blindest chain of circumstances I ever coped with has developed as clean and direct a chain of proof as I ever saw. But, Patsy, don't run away with the idea that it is your chief who has done all this. It is the hand of God."

There was a moment of silence after that, and then the detective added:

"We have practically got the murderer without having the least idea in the world what was the motive for the commission of the crime. If ever I saw a case work backward from the start, this one has done that very thing."

"Backward or forward, the end is the same."

"It will be the same for Putnam Pierce."

The detective started from his chair as he said this.

"Wait here, Patsy," he said. "Wait where you are until Chick comes. If he has not got that chauffeur with him, tell him to go after him and bring him here. I will want to see him when I return."

"Where are you going?"

"I am going to the house of Putnam Pierce, in Madison Avenue. I don't know what I will discover there, but whether I find anything or not, I won't be absent very long."

He stepped to his cabinet and placed a few articles which he thought he might need, in his pockets and left the house without another word.

A short and rapid walk brought him to the front of Putnam Pierce's home, and at a glance he saw that the outward appearance of the house was the same as when he had passed it a brief time before.

Without hesitation he ran up the steps to the front door, and there, for a moment, he stopped and listened.

He heard nothing, and presently bringing the picklock into play—the same one with which he had experimented on the doors of the bank—he soon pushed the door open and entered the dimly lighted hall.

There was a second dim light in a small room at the end

of the hall, and, tiptoeing toward it, Nick discovered Pierce's valet, fast asleep in his chair where he awaited the return of his master.

The detective drew a phial from his pocket and held it, uncorked, for a considerable time, beneath the nostrils of the sleeping man; and at last satisfied that it would require considerable shaking to rouse him, the detective turned and made his way as directly to the sleeping room of Putnam Pierce as if he had lived in the house all his life.

"I cannot have very much time," he mused, "but I'll improve it while it lasts. I think, Mr. Pierce, that this will prove to be one of the quickest cases on record."

There was a fair-sized safe in one corner of the room, and this Nick attacked at once.

It will be remembered that he had stated at the bank that he could open combination locks by ear as readily as the safe experts that are employed by the companies. Indeed, readers of Nick Carter's adventures are aware of several cases where he has performd this somewhat phenomenal feat.

In the estimation of an expert, however, it is not phenomenal at all, being merely an education of the ear to that particular work.

He noticed, when he commenced on the safe, that it was of the same manufacture as the safes at the bank, and this fact interested him somewhat.

Several minutes were employed in obtaining access to the safe, but at last the door swung open to his touch and the interior was revealed to him.

There were a number of receptacles inside the safe for the accommodation of cash, jewels and articles of especial value, and these were locked separately; but, happily, the bunch of keys which fitted them was there on the bottom of the safe, so he had no trouble in opening each of them.

His reward was almost immediate.

In one of these compartments he found the money that had been taken from the bank; in another were the jewels which were the private property of Thomas Blake; in another and larger compartment he found a confused mass of rings, jewels, tiaras and necklaces, and in the main body of the safe an assortment of valuables such as no honest man could have accumulated.

"By Jove!" muttered the detective, "it begins to look as if Mr. Putnam Pierce is a professional cracksman, as well as a murderer. This was a good move of mine to come here."

CHAPTER XI.

NICK CARTER'S MASCOT CASE.

Nick Carter was thoroughly aware that it was necessary that he should work quickly.

He had no wish that Pierce should return and find him there, for he did not care to arrest him at once; for reasons of his own he preferred to wait until the morning to do that, and he wished to do it in a little different manner from that which he would be obliged to adopt if Pierce should return too soon to suit his convenience.

But as in every phase of this case, fortune seemed to be working with the detective.

There was not a doubt in the mind of the detective that he had unwittingly fallen upon the mysterious burglar who for years had been preying upon the wealthy people of New York and Newport.

During a long period of time, mysterious robberies had been reported to the police from these sources.

Jewels of immense value had disappeared as if they had taken to themselves wings and flown away through the windows; and in every case there had been left no possible clew to the identity of the burglar, or to his methods of work.

Nick had never been called upon one of these cases, but he had often talked them over with the people at headquarters where the concensus of opinion was stated in the words of Inspector O'Brien, who on one occasion had said to Nick:

"These robberies are committed by a man who works entirely alone. He has no confederate of any kind. He takes nothing but valuable gems. He is either a rich man himself, or he poses as one. He is admitted as a guest to the houses from which he steals. He is a slick article, but, slick as he is, some day he will be caught."

The last of these reported robberies had been a necklace of diamonds, rubies and emeralds, taken from the house of the Stuyvesant-Cranes. Nick had read carefully a description of the necklace, and now, at this moment, he was convinced that he held that identical article in his hand.

"It's a bully find!" he mused.

Then he started to his feet, went quickly to a bureau and pulled open one drawer after another until he found what he wanted, and then, without disturbing the remaining articles in the drawer he took therefrom a pillow case with which he returned to the safe.

It required but a moment for him to dump all that he had found into the pillow case; and then, as he was in the act of arranging the interior of the safe—or at least that part of it which was immediately in view upon opening the safe—a letter fell into his hand.

He was about to return it to the pigeon-hole from which it had fallen, when he noticed that the envelope bore the imprint of the Belden National Bank, and that the postmark upon it was the date of the preceding day; that is, the Saturday before the murder—yesterday, in fact, for the time yet lacked a few moments of midnight.

He dumped that into the bag with the plunder from the safe, and then having closed the door and whirled the dial around so that the safe was locked as safely as when he found it, he threw the improvised bag over his shoulder and started for the door.

As he reached the head of the stairs and just as he was in the act of beginning his descent to the parlor floor, the front door of the house opened, and Putnam Pierce entered.

Instantly the detective drew back, and stepped into a small room at the top of the stairs where he slipped behind the door and waited.

He heard Pierce call in loud tones to his valet; and then, because the valet did not immediately reply, he cursed.

Nick smiled when Pierce strode through the hall and roughly shook the valet into semi-consciousness.

"Drunk again, are you?" he heard Pierce exclaim. "Don't you dare to answer me. Get yourself upstairs to your bed, and if this is repeated just once more I won't discharge you, but I'll put you where you'll never serve another man. I'll kill you, you swine!"

The valet attempted to grumble out some sort of an explanation, but Pierce kicked him through the hall with many curses, and presently Nick heard the poor fellow stumble past him and ascend the second flight of stairs toward his own sleeping room.

A moment later Pierce came up the stairs.

Nick hoped that he would not take it into his head to look around through the rooms, and was satisfied when he discovered that Pierce had no intention of doing so.

The man went directly to his own room, and Nick, after a little, stole out into the hall so that he could both see and hear what Pierce was doing; for he had determined that if the man attempted to open his safe, he would attack and arrest him then and there.

But Pierce evidently had no such thought.

He grumbled a little about the drunkenness of his valet, and all the time rapidly prepared himself for bed, announcing to his reflection in the mirror, in no uncertain terms, that he was dog tired.

And at last, while the detective still watched him, he turned off the lights and, having taken a stiff horn from a flask on his dresser, he tumbled between the sheets.

Nick waited where he was until he was sure that Pierce was sleeping; and then, with a well-pleased smile on his face, he went softly down the stairs, and out of the house as silently as a shadow.

The pillow case filled with jewels was still over his shoulder, and he knew that he would be stopped by the first policeman he met; in this he was not mistaken, for he had not gone a block before he was held up by a blue-coated official.

"Here, my man, what have you got there?" he demanded.

"Plunder," said Nick; "and lots of it. Hello, Finnegan! Don't you know me?"

"By the powers if it ain't Mr. Carter."

"That same," said Nick, laughing. "Just walk along with me, will you, for safe-keeping."

"Sure. Have you been afther cracking a crib somewhere, Mr. Carter?"

"That's what I have, Mike; and a good one at that."

"Faith, it looks like it. What have ye there, anyhow?"

"About a hundred thousand dollars' worth of jewels."

"Hivins, man! Ye don't say so!"

"I do, though."

"Where did ye git it?"

"I borrowed it for the night, from the man who stole it first. To-morrow I'm going to show it to him and ask him where he got it."

"Sure, Mr. Carter, you're a wonder, so you are!"

"I'm not a circumstance to the fellow who swiped all this stuff originally."

"Who is he, Mr. Carter?"

"He's a millionaire cracksman who lives up the avenue a little way from here."

"A millionaire cracksman? What the divil does a millionaire want with crackin' cribs?"

"I suspect that that is how he got his million or so, or at least that it is the way he laid the foundation for them."

"Why didn't you gobble him at the same time that you got the swag?"

"Well, for one thing, he was very weary and wished to retire. For another, so was I. Then again, I preferred to hold off till morning. It is one of the cases, Mike, where I want a warrant, so I thought I'd wait till I could secure one."

"Well, sir, this is the end of my beat. I'll have to leave you here."

"All right. Good-night."

The detective reached his home in safety, and there he found that Chick had arrived; also that he had anticipated the wishes of his chief, and had succeeded in bringing the chauffeur of Putnam Pierce's automobile with him.

"Chick," he said to his chief assistant, "we are in luck. Oh, I'll talk with the chauffeur presently. He can wait until I'm ready for him; and when I do talk with him you will hear something that will surprise you. We are in great luck. This has turned out to be a mascot case."

"A mascot case? I don't quite catch on."

"Of course you don't. I didn't, either, until I suddenly had the idea of going out again, after Patsy brought the package to me that Pierce had attempted to chuck into the river."

"Where did you go, eh?"

"To Pierce's house. I had the idea, and I followed it up. It was worth while, too."

"Tell me about it."

"Wait just a minute. Bring that chauffeur in here now and listen to me while I talk to him."

"All right. I'll have him here in a moment."

The man was soon brought before the detective, and he was told to make himself comfortable in a chair which faced the detective across the table, while the three assistants occupied other chairs between him and the door.

"Now, my man," said Nick, "did you ever hear about the third degree?"

"Yes, sir, I have."

"Well, brace yourself, then, for you are about to get it for fair."

CHAPTER XII.

EVERY MYSTERY EXPLAINED.

"What is your name?" asked the detective.

"Martin Long?"

"Are you a professional chauffeur?"

"I know how to run a machine, if that is what you mean?"

"What other profession have you?"

"Do you mean a trade? I haven't any at all."

"Were you with your master when he robbed Mrs. Stuyvesant-Crane of the fifty-thousand-dollar necklace?"

The man stared at the detective, but attempted to make no reply.

"Answer me," said Nick.

"It's none of your cursed business."

"Oh, yes it is, as you shall soon know. Look here."

The detective thrust one hand into the pillow case which rested on the table and drew forth the necklace in question.

"Do you recognize it?" he asked.

Long preserved a sullen silence.

"It won't do you any good to pout," said Nick, "for the whole case is dead against you. All that I want to find out is who is the most guilty, you or Pierce."

"I ain't guilty of anything, only driving him in the machine to the places he wanted to go."

"Oh, you are not, eh?"

"No."

"How much percentage of the robberies fell to your share?"

"That is none of your business, either."

"Look here, Mr. Martin Long, if that is your real name—for I think that picture of yours down at headquarters is listed under a different one—you might as well make a clean breast of this business, for the case is dead against you. Look here!"

The detective turned the pillow case upside down and dumped the entire contents on the table.

"Do you think now that I am talking through my hat?" he asked.

"Where in blazes did you get it?" exclaimed Long, taken entirely off his guard.

"Your master loaned it to me for the purpose of proving that you are the greater rascal," replied the detective.

"Well, if I am a bigger one than he is, I take the prize; that's all."

"You are beginning to acknowledge the corn, I see."

"Why not? If you've got the swag, what's the use of denying?"

"Now you are talking sense. How long have you and Pierce worked together?"

"About four years."

"How many people have you robbed in that time?"

"Say, what do you think I am, anyhow? An encyclopedia, or a blooming amanuensis? I ain't kept no record of them things. Pierce has one, though, in his safe."

"You have had quite a go at it, haven't you?"

"I should say so. It was fun, too, while it lasted."

"Do you know that Pierce murdered the banker?"

"No; I don't."

"Where was he all yesterday before noon?"

"Out on some private job; I don't know what."

"Now, look here, Long, will you be sensible and confess all you know to the district attorney if I will make it as light for you as I can?"

"I suppose I might as well. I ain't got any love for Pierce, as I know of. He's a hard master, and if he killed Belden—well, I ain't got any use for him; and I know that he's been planning to kill him, since he got a letter from him Saturday morning. When I heard about the murder I made up my mind that Pierce knew something about it."

Nick remembered the letter, then, that he had taken from the safe, and he opened it and read it through to the end. It was very short, however, and was as follows:

"PUTNAM PIERCE: This is a warning to you to permit you to escape if you care to do so. I have positive information that you are a burglar and a thief, and on Monday morning I shall place that information before the proper authorities. You have until then to escape, unless you presume to present yourself at my house or at the bank in the meantime, in which case I shall act at once.

"WAYNE BELDEN."

"This clears up the doubts as to the motive for the crime," murmured the detective. "Now if I only knew where he procured those keys——"

"Do you mean the keys to the bank?" asked Long.

"Yes."

"I made them. I told you that I had no trade, but I am an expert locksmith. That is the way I knew Pierce. I used to work with him when he was expert safe opener for the Garvin Safe Company. That was a long time ago."

"Ah!" said Nick. "So he was that, was he?"

"Yes; and there never was a better one than he, either. He can open any safe you ever saw, except, of course, a time lock."

"Long, you have cleared up the entire case. Now tell me how you made those keys, and how many of them you made."

"I made three. One was to the front door of Belden's house; another was for the street doors of the bank itself, and the other was for some door inside the bank; I don't know what one."

"The counting-room door?"

"Possibly. He got the impressions of the keys he wanted, somehow—I don't know how. It was a very simple matter to make the keys after that."

"For you; yes."

"Chick," said the detective, turning to his assistant, "take this fellow down to headquarters and have him locked up. To-morrow we will get his full confession, and if it is complete enough I will make it as light for him as possible with the district attorney.

"Patsy, you take a run up to Fifty-seventh Street, wake up Judge Foster and tell him I want a bench warrant for the arrest of Putnam Pierce for the murder of Wayne Belden.

"Ten-Ichi, you go and hover around the door of Pierce's house and wait there till he comes out. Take Joseph with you, and when Pierce does come out, if it is before I get there, have Joseph telephone me at once while you follow Pierce."

* * * * * * *

Putnam Pierce did not appear on the street until ten o'clock the following morning, and when he did appear he went directly to the banker's house.

And there, while he still waited in the parlor after sending his card to Olive, Nick and Chick, followed by Ten-Ichi and Patsy, entered with the warrant.

Olive Belden appeared at the same moment, and was therefore a witness when Nick Carter placed his hand on the shoulder of the man who had murdered her father.

And Pierce made no resistance. He only looked daggers at the detective, and maintained a sullen silence.

* * * * * * *

And so the mystery of the millionaire cracksman, as well as that of the murder of Wayne Belden, was cleared up, and Nick Carter, when he directed Chick to enter it in the journal as one of the finished cases, remarked that it was the quickest and most complete one of his experience.

THE END.

No. 464 of the NICK CARTER WEEKLY will be entitled "The Mystery Man; or, Nick Carter's Smartest Opponent." Out next week.

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